

TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

A.C.WARD

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**TWENTIETH-CENTURY
LITERATURE**

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE NINETEEN-TWENTIES

LANDMARKS IN WESTERN LITERATURE

AMERICAN LITERATURE: 1880-1930

WHAT IS THIS LIFE?

THE FROLIC AND THE GENTLE

TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE

BY
A. C. WARD

NINTH EDITION



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PREFACE TO THE SEVENTH EDITION

WHILE RENEWING my acquaintance with this book during the preparation of the present enlarged edition, it became evident to me that in 1940 I have fewer enthusiasms and fewer animosities than I had in 1928. I was therefore inclined, while making revisions and additions, to bring the following pages into line with my current way of thinking. In a few instances this led to a substantial modification of opinions expressed in the earlier editions, but where my former interest in any particular writer has gone beyond recovery I have allowed the views of my departed self to prevail. It is probable that if this survey had been first written at the present date I should have omitted entirely some names that seemed worth including in 1928. I retain most of these, however, since reputations moribund at the moment will not necessarily remain so and others that now flourish may wither away.

I have utilized some passages from my book on *The Nineteen-Twenties*, to which, and to *The Nineteen-Thirties*, readers are referred for fuller discussion of the writers of those decades.

A. C. WARD

*AUTHOR'S NOTE
TO THE FIRST EDITION*

THE AIM of this book is to outline the literary history of the first quarter of the twentieth century and to provide an introductory commentary upon books and authors.

My purpose was, further: that the book should be compact; that it should give a general, not a sectional, survey; and that it should avoid overcrowding. Contemporary valuations in literature are dependent upon personal preferences, and no one can at present say whether Time will or will not justify my exclusions and inclusions.

I wish to express my grateful thanks to Margaret Couling for much generous help.

A. C. WARD

March 1928

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTORY	I
§ 1. VICTORIANISM AND THE AGE OF INTERROGATION	
§ 2. CRUMBLING FOUNDATIONS	
II. NOVELISTS	18
§ 1. H. G. WELLS	
§ 2. ARNOLD BENNETT	
§ 3. JOHN GALSWORTHY	
§ 4. JOSEPH CONRAD	
§ 5. TRADITION AND EXPERIMENT	
§ 6. WOMEN NOVELISTS	
§ 7. DETECTIVE STORIES	
III. DRAMATISTS	83
§ 1. THE TWILIGHT OF THE DRAMA	
§ 2. GEORGE BERNARD SHAW	
§ 3. JOHN GALSWORTHY	
§ 4. THE IRISH THEATRE	
§ 5. THE REPERTORY MOVEMENT	
§ 6. J. M. BARRIE	
§ 7. THE THEATRE BETWEEN WARS	
IV. POETRY	139
§ 1. SURVIVORS AND PRECURSORS	
§ 2. THOMAS HARDY	
§ 3. NARRATIVE AND SATIRE	
§ 4. RUPERT BROOKE AND THE SOLDIER POETS	
§ 5. GEORGIAN POETRY	
§ 6. NATURE POETRY	
§ 7. INNOVATORS AND OTHERS	
§ 8. THE NEW METAPHYSICALS	
V. ESSAYISTS AND CRITICS	202
§ 1. MAX BEERBOHM	
§ 2. THE MANTLE OF LAMB	
§ 3. LITERATURE—AND LIFE	

X TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE

CHAPTER	PAGE
VI. TRAVELLERS AND BIOGRAPHERS	222
§ 1. W. H. HUDSON AND CUNNINGHAME GRAHAM	
§ 2. HILAIRE BELLOC AND OTHERS	
§ 3. BIOGRAPHY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY	
INDEX WITH BOOK LISTS	245

**TWENTIETH-CENTURY
LITERATURE**

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

§ I. *Victorianism and the Age of Interrogation*

BY LITERARY critics and historians the term 'Victorian Age' is not applied precisely to the years during which Queen Victoria reigned, but to a vaguely defined period when the outlook of English people was determined by that special attitude known as 'Victorianism'. As soon as any attempt is made to isolate the essentials of Victorianism, however, it becomes clear that more than one of the great Victorians escapes from the formula. Nevertheless, amid a mass of vital differences and in face of a 'limitless variety of interactions', it is possible to observe in many of the Victorians a dogmatic certainty with an emotional bias that was peculiar to the Age and may therefore be said to constitute Victorianism. In its simplest and purest form, Victorianism actually found a more congenial atmosphere in nineteenth-century America than in Victorian England. Longfellow and other New Englanders of the time had fewer doubts about the validity of current optimisms than had Tennyson, Dickens, Ruskin, and some other eminent contemporary Englishmen.

In the study of literature few things are more interesting than to consider the periodic changes of outlook which sway the human mind and spirit; to observe those recurrent fluctuations of values which cause the truths and certainties of one generation to appear as superstitions and baseless conventions in the eyes of generations following. Young men and young women during the early decades of the twentieth century looked back upon the Victorian Age with a sceptical lifting of the eyebrows and an ironical grin. They regarded that age as dully hypocritical and stuffy. They said (and said somewhat too loudly) that Victorian ideals were mean and superficial and stupid. They mocked

at Tennyson, yawned over George Eliot, swept through Dickens by leaps a hundred pages long. This insurgent mood was partly the cause and partly the consequence of changes, effected or impending, in the literature of the first quarter of the twentieth century. From 1901 to 1925 English literature was directed by mental attitudes, moral ideals, and spiritual values at almost the opposite extreme from the attitudes, ideals, and values governing Victorian literature. The old certainties were certainties no longer. Everything was held to be open to question: everything—from the nature of the Deity to the construction of verse-forms. While H. G. Wells was revising *God*,¹ Rupert Brooke was inverting the sonnet and apprising us that Helen of Troy no doubt became at length a withered crone. Standards of artistic craftsmanship and of aesthetic appreciation began to change fundamentally, with consequences not to be fully demonstrated in literature until, in the nineteen-thirties, such writers as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and W. H. Auden, among others, became accepted though not universally approved as significant figures in literature.

What the Victorians had considered beautiful their children and grandchildren considered execrable. The treasured bric-à-brac of Victorian mantelshelves and what-nots was thrown into Edwardian and Georgian dustbins, though before the reign of George V was out many of the rejects had attained the status of antiques and collectors' pieces: wholesale destruction had conferred the glamour of rarity upon objects formerly distinguished only as evidence of bad taste.

But however much the insurgents of the post-Victorian generation disliked the furnishings of Victorian households, they were even more irritable about the furnishings of Victorian minds. In the Victorian Age there was a widespread acknowledgment of the rule of the Expert; the Voice of Authority was accepted in religion, in politics, in

¹ *God the Invisible King*, 1917.

literature, in family life. Men and women did unfeignedly desire to accept the pronouncements of this Voice. When the orthodox Voice was not heeded, it was usually because a rival voice spoke more persuasively to individual ears. To some, the Voice of Darwin speaking in *The Descent of Man* sounded more persuasively credible and more authoritative than the Voice of God speaking in the Book of Genesis. It was not the acceptance of any single body of doctrine that distinguished the Victorian, but his insistent *attitude* of acceptance, his persistent belief in (but only rare examination of) the credentials of Authority, his innate desire to affirm and conform rather than to reject or to question. Whatever weakness underlay the Victorian spirit of acceptance and affirmation was, for the most part, an innocent weakness. It consisted in a readiness to accept phrases at face value without critical examination. Victorian faith and morality may have been unflawed on the surface, but to twentieth-century minds they seemed often to lack any core of personally realized conviction—to be mere second-hand clothing of the mind and spirit. Was it for this reason that so many Victorians appeared to walk in hourly dread of 'losing their faith' (as the phrase went)? Rose Macaulay told of how 'one evening, shortly before Christmas, in the days when our forefathers, being young, possessed the earth—in brief, in the year 1879—Mrs. Garden came briskly into her drawing-room from Mr. Garden's study and said in her crisp, even voice to her six children, "Well, my dears, I have to tell you something. Poor papa has lost his faith again".'¹ Many prototypes of Mr. Garden existed outside fiction, and Tennyson, aware of their plight, buoyed them up with one of those sweeping generalities that he could compress so skilfully into a phrase:

There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

Authority had spoken; the Doubtful were raised up. The

¹ *Told by an Idiot.*

phrases of the Victorian seers were, for their own generation, as powerful as an Oriental spell, as compelling as the utterances of the Oracle at Delphi; and they were received with no less confidence.

It was this willing submission to oracular voices, without adequate examination, that led to the Victorians' being misunderstood by their successors. But the lure of the phrase is hard to resist; and—deaf to Carlyle's counsel, 'Be not the slave of words'—few Victorians desired to resist it. In its resounding emptiness, Swinburne's

Glory to Man in the highest! for Man is the master of things

is as Victorian as any of Tennyson's high astounding phrases or Ruskin's sugared sweetnesss. Ruskin told his audiences that they 'must get into the habit of looking intensely at words, and assuring themselves of their meaning, syllable by syllable—nay, letter by letter'. The advice was sound but very little followed, and the popular acceptance of Ruskin himself as an oracle depended much upon uncritical delight in the lulling melody of his prose: 'A true wife, in her husband's house, is his servant; it is in his heart that she is queen'; 'The path of a good woman is indeed strewn with flowers; but they rise behind her steps, not before them'. Yet, however suspect by later minds, this glad endurance of the tyranny of the phrase is too harshly interpreted when described as a symptom of 'Victorian hypocrisy'. At worst it was a sign of mental inertia; at best, a conscious exercise of the attitude of acceptance and of the impulse towards reverence.

A further characteristic of Victorianism was an impassioned belief in the permanence of nineteenth-century institutions, both temporal and spiritual. The Victorians seemed to themselves to be living in a house built on unshakable foundations and established in perpetuity. Whatever they did was done as in the light of eternity. The Home, the Constitution, the Empire, the Christian religion—each of these, in its own form and degree, was

accepted as a final revelation. It was not allowable even to hint that, in the course of natural processes of change, any or all of these institutions might be displaced by alternative institutions. In this respect some of the rebel Victorians were more Victorian than rebel. They would have been completely happy in the Victorian household if they had been permitted to make no more than one or two minor alterations. Swinburne was indignant that 'The House of God' should be written on the gatepost; but if, without hindrance, he could have painted out the old lettering and inscribed, in its place, 'Devil's Hall', he would have gone contentedly indoors to live respectably ever after, as indeed he did. William Morris wanted to improve the domestic arrangements and change the pattern of the wallpaper; yet, for all his strong discontent, he would not have proposed to pull down the house, nor would he have agreed that it was too flimsy for permanent occupation.

Among early twentieth-century writers, the Victorian idea of the Permanence of Institutions was displaced by the sense of a universal lack of fixity. H. G. Wells speaks of 'the flow of things',¹ and elsewhere describes a company of people as 'haunted by the idea that embodies itself in the word "Meanwhile"'. He goes on: 'In the measure in which one saw life plainly the world ceased to be a home and became the mere site of a home. On which we camped. Unable as yet to live fully and completely.' Later, he speaks of 'all this world of ours being no more than the prelude to a real civilization'.²

If the cost of seeing life plainly is that the world no longer appears to be a home but only the site of a home, the Victorians would have listened with composure to the charge that they did not see life plainly. The change of outlook that came with the twentieth century was due to the growth of a restless desire to probe and question. Bernard Shaw, foremost among the heralds of change, attacked with vigour the 'old superstition' of religion and

¹ *The World of William Clissold* (1926).

² *Meanwhile* (1927).

the 'new superstition' of science, not because he was antagonistic to either religion or science, as such, but because, in his view, every dogma is a superstition until it has been personally examined and consciously accepted by the individual believer. *Question! Examine! Test!*—these were the watchwords of his creed. He let slip no opportunity to challenge the Voice of Authority and the Reign of the Expert. With equal assurance he interrogated economists, artists, doctors, educationists, politicians, scientists, religionists, and the effect of his writings was to spread abroad the interrogative habit of mind. Thousands who had been brought up to regard religion and morality as subjects to be spoken of with reverently lowered voices, heard, as though it were a trumpet-call, Andrew Undershaft's declaration in Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara*: 'That is what is wrong with the world at present. It scraps its obsolete steam engines and dynamos; but it won't scrap its old prejudices and its old moralities and its old religions and its old political constitutions.' The effect of this proclamation was invigorating to some; but many others might have expressed their sensations in the words of Barbara herself, 'I stood on the rock I thought eternal; and without a word it reeled and crumbled under me.'

(It rarely, if ever, happens that all the writers in a given period can be covered by a single formula. Though for the present purpose the first phase of twentieth-century literature is labelled *The Age of Interrogation*, it is not pretended that the phrase fits all the writers, or all the works of any of the writers.) But it does at least suggest the direction in which the current was flowing during a period, marked by a bewildering flux of ideas and of tentative experimentation in literature. The questioning spirit of the Age inevitably developed bitter and explosive tendencies in the catastrophic circumstances of the World War of 1914-18 and the continuous series of economic and nerve crises culminating in a resumption of major warfare in the autumn of 1939. Amid the stressful welter of an

upheaved world carrying with it a generation of writers expressing its torments as much in contortions of form and style as in content, the technical reachings-out before 1914 of Shaw, Wells, and Conrad seemed to their successors timid, and their ideas and convictions pallid. The sweeping away of Victorian dogmas led at length to an age of rival dogmatisms, with politics enthroned in the place of religion, with hatred as the fostered motive power of national and partisan action, and with ideological jargon established in succession to the reasoned argument which had for a while ousted the nineteenth-century language of piety. The revolt from Victorianism—from its (however illusory) sense of stability, its striving for order, its consciousness of dignity—created for the multitude only a spiritual vacuum, the natural habitation of demons. But Victorianism was bound to die, of its own excess; and it had been long a-dying. In the middle years of Victorianism, as early as 1869, Meredith was writing in one of his letters, 'Isn't there a scent of damned hypocrisy in all this lisping and vowelled purity of the *Idylls* [of Tennyson]?' Hardy, simultaneously, was murmuring in his earliest poems against the 'purblind doomsters' whose 'crass Casualty' seemed to him to hold the universe in purposeless and automatic bondage. And by 1872 Samuel Butler had begun, in *Erewhon*, that attack on Victorianism which he was to conduct with vehemence and delighted boyish malice for the remainder of the nineteenth century. In the eighteen-nineties the gravity of the Victorians was further shaken by the so-called Decadence, impatient 'to eat of the fruit of all the trees in the garden of the world'.¹ Victorianism outlived the Decadents; but at the turn of the new century came a succession of writers with powerfully sceptical minds untouched by reverence for custom or the established order. These writers had grown up during the 'nineties, but they had not conformed to the current doctrine of 'art for art's sake'. They questioned Decadence as thoroughly as they

¹ Oscar Wilde: *De Profundis* (1905).

questioned Victorianism, and the Age of Interrogation had begun.

§ 2. *Crumbling Foundations*

A lengthy series of reverses in the Boer War of 1899-1901 acted as a disquieting intimation to the British people that their imperial might was less invulnerable than had been commonly taken for granted. Confidence was undermined by the sustained resistance of the Dutch settlers in South Africa, who demonstrated the falsity of the British assumption that their foe was as poor in spirit and campaigning skill as in numbers. The end of that struggle came tardily a short time after Queen Victoria died, almost at the very opening of the new century. The accession of Edward VII brightened English society without heightening its tone, and British morality drifted into the doldrums after several decades of favouring Victorian breezes. Meanwhile the momentum of British industrial supremacy was slackening, and to those who could and would read the signs it was apparent that in trade and manufacture an era of grim competition was ahead; while the growing insistence of Germany's naval challenge touched Britain's tenderest and most vital spot. The British people did not provoke or desire the war that was declared on Germany in August 1914. The immediate origins of the struggle lay in acts which compelled Britain's intervention on behalf of nations she was pledged to help if and when their integrity should be threatened. But the historian will undoubtedly observe that Britain, in the circumstances prevailing in the world in the early years of the twentieth century, could not indefinitely evade a situation that offered her no other choice but to yield her primacy to Germany or to fight.

So, by a tortuous route, the World War of 1914-18 came. Few people or institutions went unchanged through those four years, and literature shared in the shaping and mis-shaping process. In English literature the most

surprising immediate effect was a revival of poetry. Regarded since the death of Tennyson as a somewhat effeminate art (except while Kipling and Henley were declaiming patriotic and defiant masculinities), it became evident once again that poetry is essentially the language of life and death and of all the crucial experiences that intervene between these ultimate states. The war produced its Rupert Brooke and Julian Grenfell, its Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. Hardly noticed amid the clamour arose voices with a different accent: T. S. Eliot in verse, Virginia Woolf in prose. Of these, much was to be heard later, when the wartime poets had ceased to be surprising and were no longer praised beyond their literary merits.

The war over (or, as it proved, suspended only, for a generation), another and bloodless war began. The expected new world of freedom and universal brotherhood—in the catch-phrases of the period, the ‘world fit for heroes’ promised by politicians as the reward of ‘the war to end war’—conspicuously failed to appear, except in a vision to those who declared it born in Soviet Russia in November 1917.

The Bloodless War was entered upon as soon as the armies of exhausted men and women had stored, once again, sufficient reserves of mental strength and energy to fight against the threatened wastage of all they had been persuaded to sacrifice in the World War. Not more than a few months were needed for the first wave of disillusion to reach its crest, as a consequence of the realization that political chicanery was still a force in public affairs, and that the spirit of *camraderie* loudly encouraged during the war had not changed the heart of mankind nor deeply affected human relations. It was folly, perhaps, to expect that ‘the post-war world would be different from the pre-war world so far as the fundamentals of character were concerned; yet that had been a persistent hope among thousands in the armies. Whatever horror or cynicism or boredom the soldiers might suffer, there was the confident

expectation that their own countrymen and countrywomen would not forget, and that one or other of the Utopian catchwords of the wartime politicians and publicists would prove to have some near relation to actuality.

But even at the end of the nineteen-twenties it was still unapparent to multitudes of the prosperous and contented that any important campaign was in progress against them, just as it was unapparent to as large a number that, in other ways, a silent revolution had been effected. Probably at no time since Constantine made it an official religion had Christianity been so seriously shaken as in the years following 1918. The weakening of Christian belief inevitably weakened, also, the traditional regard for authority in both personal and public government. But few men and women have advanced so far as to impose upon themselves voluntarily the degree of self-discipline necessary to make them bearable to themselves or endurable as members of a community. Until that desirable state of self-discipline is reached, conformity to some external system of discipline is essential. In the post-war generation the process of overthrowing authority was so swiftly accelerated that youth was swept off its feet, and either drifted, with no sense of direction, or threw out its hands to clutch whatever promised stability or gave external support. It is supremely difficult to be a complete sceptic, a confident and happy nothingarian, in either religion or politics. Discovering this with more than a little dismay, many in the modern generation developed an astonishing tolerance of freak sects and parties. Other superstitions and credulities took the place of the former beliefs and certainties, and in these conditions began a new phase of hero-worship in which men of power and action assumed the stature of gods.

There remained, however, considerable numbers who shed the old beliefs without adopting alternatives. These were convinced of the bankruptcy of existing constitutions; sceptical not only of all in authority, but also of all who

aimed at authority. They offered no remedy because they had trust in none. They were spectators and critics of life, with an intense individualistic conviction that it is both dangerous and unwarrantable to attempt to arrange the lives of other people. Such persons were tolerant of modern civilization only in so far as it safeguarded the individual person from oppression by others; they were intolerant of it in so far as its persistent tendency was to standardize the human mind and spirit according to a pattern which pleased the majority, however unintelligent or base.

The most advertised and spectacular outcome of the war of 1914-18 was the establishment of the League of Nations, which intervened several times to prevent threatened outbreaks between minor Powers, and transacted with credit a vast amount of work making for international humanitarianism and social betterment. Yet, despite the Solemn Covenant and the subsequent treaties by which it was buttressed, the League failed to secure universal confidence. This was in part due to the use of the League by the victor nations less as an instrument of international justice than as a device for keeping the defeated in subjection. The League was totally disrupted by the presence among its member-States of some who gave only temporary lip-service to its ideals and violated them as soon as national aspirations and the desire for territorial expansion appeared realizable. The League merely temporized when Japan attacked China, applied sanctions only half-heartedly and ineffectually when Italy invaded Abyssinia, tolerated a farcically misnamed Non-Intervention Committee during the Spanish Civil War of 1936-38, and allowed itself the moral luxury of a valueless expulsion of Soviet Russia when the independence of Finland was violated in 1939, long after Japan, Germany, and Italy had withdrawn from membership.

It has been necessary to refer directly to these matters, for writers in the nineteen-twenties and thirties developed an intense political and social consciousness which coloured

and conditioned much of the literary output of the period.

Early in 1929 an avalanche of anti-war books began. The possibility of such a visitation was foreshadowed seven years earlier with the publication of C. E. Montague's *Disenchantment*, read and admired as much for its distinction of style as for its strong yet moderated protest—so well moderated as to seem scarcely more than good-mannered indignation. Later books by Montague—*Fiery Particles* and *Rough Justice*—were more definitely anti-war—the first ironically, the other tragically. But still his literary urbanity softened the attack. These were books for connoisseurs rather than for the multitude. What Montague had done for a few, Erich von Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* did for millions throughout Europe and America and beyond. Remarque's story and Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero* (which came out late in 1929) proclaimed that the war had been fatal to a whole generation of youth by inflicting death either morally or spiritually, or both, even when it had spared the fighters' bodies. The degree of over-emphasis in both books would have been noted by intelligent readers, and would have limited their influence, if the apologists for war had had the good sense to reserve their fire. But, in concentrated fury, an attack upon the veracity of Remarque and Aldington broke out, and led to a controversy that served only to stimulate the production of war-books for the next twelve months, and the attacks made against them seemed often to be based upon attempts to refute charges which the authors of the war-books had in fact not made. The individual ex-soldier had found himself living in a rather worse world than he lived in in June 1914; he naturally felt, therefore, that he had been 'sold', and that whatever sacrifice he and the others had made was useless. There is no reason for wonder if, in his disgust, he brooded upon the misery of his own narrow but intense experience.

There is no sure means of assessing the pacific value

of the anti-war books, or of deciding whether their effect was not rather to habituate readers to horror and to pander to masochistic tendencies. But only a few of them were other than passionately sincere in intention. For those who desired a cooler statement of the soldiers' own view of war there was, besides C. E. Montague's books, Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War* (1928); for those who preferred the romantico-realistic heroics of the public-school interpretation, R. C. Sherriff's play, *Journey's End* (1928).

The distresses of unemployment and privation were also described in a number of books, sometimes the work of actual sufferers (e.g., Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole*, 1933), sometimes of sympathetic journalists (e.g., J. B. Priestley's *English Journey*, 1934) endeavouring to acquaint the general public with the plight of the army of workless, which by that time in England numbered well over 2,000,000 until rearmament brought about a substantial though economically dubious reduction.

With these various disturbances and discontents went a far-reaching change in the code of sexual morality. The war of 1914-18 had persuaded many of those for whom death was in constant wait round the corner to snatch at the excitements and hoped-for comforts and satisfactions of physical intercourse, while the increasing employment of women (who in 1914 were still largely in the Victorian strait-waistcoat) at wages not approached in pre-war days, made them much less dependent upon the system in which marriage had been the orthodox reward of female virtue. Economic collapse in the post-war years put family life out of the reach of many thousands who would in normal circumstances have married and had children; numerous others determined not to embark upon parenthood in a world in which war was always imminent. Since the desire for children is one main incentive to marriage, the enforced or voluntary renunciation of offspring led to an increase of sexual contacts outside marriage. Sexual morality began

to seem more a matter of simple personal hygiene than of inexorable laws of the Deity. Furthermore, the popularization of motor-cars and motor-cycles, coinciding with the decay of authority in Churches and families, gave to many thousands for the first time that freedom of movement which is necessary for experimental unsanctified relations between the sexes. Contraceptive devices removed the fear impulse which, combined with irresistible sexual curiosity, has often led to disastrous marriages. It would be erroneous, however, to conclude that the institution of marriage is likely to be superseded by some system of unauthoritative personal contract. Civilized men and women have become so habituated to marriage that at least for generations to come it will continue to symbolize the desire for permanent union which is still the ideal of those to whom love means more than an occasional physical relationship.

Some militant atheists and agnostics in the later part of the nineteenth century had felt compelled to preach the rightness of sexual union without recourse to matrimony. They argued that for lovers to marry was an ignominious submission to superstition and ecclesiastical pretension, and that for them to live together unwed was an act at once of reason and social courage. Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did* (1895), one of the first novels to advertise the 'new morality', was a high-minded book, shocking to most in its own generation, dull and a little pathetic to us. Following more brightly in the same path, H. G. Wells produced a series of novels in which the characters customarily followed their own inclinations in matters of sex—marrying or not marrying. Though in certain quarters he was regarded as a notoriously immoral writer, Wells did much to rob illicit relationships of the heady romantic glamour which many (including some of the religious) associated with them and to reduce them to a commonplace level. D. H. Lawrence was at once fascinated and tormented by sex, and in his work the extreme of

sexual indulgence (e.g., *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, 1928¹) was coupled with a reversion to puritanism. In Aldous Huxley the contemplation of a state of living in which sexual promiscuity had become so habitual as to be tantamount to an expected social observance, produced a profound intellectual disgust. To Noel Coward, whose air of weary sophistication never obscured a lifelong adolescent innocence of mind, the same spectacle was emotionally saddening, provoking him to chide 'fast' cocktail-drinking girls with the touching moral earnestness of a nice-minded suburban lad. Whether in D. H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, Noel Coward, or the politic zealots of the period, the new puritanism was entirely joyless and sterile, being without faith or hope in other than material things. But the earnestness of the born reformer was rampant and inescapable throughout contemporary literature. As the European scene darkened, and oppression, cruelty, murder, and the breaking of solemn engagements became common form, a long crescendo of protest and denunciation arose, not alone in political speeches and directly propagandist writings, but also in imaginative and creative literature. It became a conviction with the younger school of writers that, with liberty, truth, and honour imperilled, no art could justify itself except as the handmaid of politics. This was a principle already firmly established by the totalitarian rulers of Russia, Italy, and Germany, where all artists were bound to use their talents to the sole end of exalting the State. The product of this creed, whether enforced—as in the countries named—or adopted voluntarily—as by many in England—was much dreary polemics. Young men and young women 'got politics', as their grandparents were accustomed to 'get religion'. In both cases the impulse was purely irrational. The same romantic idealism which had led Christian Victorians to the foreign mission field led Communist neo-Georgians to the battlefield in Spain and

¹ In the original (Florence and Paris) editions; the version published in England is emasculated.

China. With the more stay-at-home kind, Victorian social slumming among 'the deserving poor' was displaced by intellectual slumming among 'the workers'. And whereas the grandparents had written pious tracts for unbelievers, the grandchildren wrote proletarian pamphlets for already converted comrades, since Communist literature brought conviction almost exclusively to the already convicted: the Left Book Club became the twentieth-century counterpart of the nineteenth-century Band of Hope. All this was intensely sincere and in that respect admirable; absurdly wasteful of material and effort, and in that respect deplorable. Good artists, good novelists, good poets, may and often do make incomparably bad politicians. A generation before, Bernard Shaw had eschewed art *qua* art, but his renunciation did little harm to his work considered as literature, for he kept firm hold on wit, humour, a sense of style (which implies a respect for words and their meanings), and independence of judgment. But numerous imaginative writers in the nineteen-thirties, out of a false sense of social service and in an illuded condition of mind, suppressed their creative abilities and turned to 'writings for the times', based on a set of assumptions usually incapable of proof and rarely supported by evidence:¹ the Dogmatic-Oracular of Victorian times returned with only a change of haberdashery—a lurid tie or a funereal shirt instead of Geneva bands or an Oxford collar. The spokesmen of this movement in literature rightly insisted that the writer cannot be a hermit-crab, that he must speak for his fellow-men, and concern himself with the science of living together.² He must write for and to the masses. It so happened, however, that a number of those who wrote for the masses and professed to have simplified their way of saying things in the hope that poetry might thereby be brought back into popular favour,³ were

¹ e.g., Christopher Caudwell's *Studies in a Dying Culture*, 1938, one of the best of its class.

² See *Revolution in Writing*, by C. Day Lewis, 1935.

³ *Ibid.*

actually employing a highly complex intellectualized language outside the mental range and unstimulating to the emotions of most of the proletariat. C. Day Lewis, the author of the pamphlet named above, himself a notable poet, had previously¹ written more convincingly about the relationship between poetry and politics, and had said, 'That is as much as we can ever know of the nature of poetry—the angel seen at the window, the air of glory.' Any plea that the artist should maintain his own integrity as the revealer of truth and beauty and dignity in a world desperately needing this revelation was met by the ardent partisan with the assertion that this was mere 'escapism'. Examining with sympathy the proletarian claim that the artist must sacrifice himself as an individual to the requirements of the community,² E. M. Forster wrote:³ 'There are two chief reasons for Escapism. We may retire to 'our towers because we are afraid. . . . But there is another motive for retreat. Boredom; disgust; indignation against the herd, the community, and the world; the conviction that sometimes comes to the solitary individual that his solitude gives him something finer and greater than he gets when he merges in the multitude. . . . The community is selfish and, to further its own efficiency, is a traitor to the side of human nature which expresses itself in solitude. Considering all the harm the community does to-day, it is in no position to start a moral slanging match. . . . We are here on earth not to save ourselves and not to save the community, but to try to save both.'

¹ *A Hope for Poetry*, 1934.

² See Vera Brittain's biography of Winifred Holtby, *Testament of Friendship* (1940), for a detailed study of a talented writer in this dilemma.

³ 'The Ivory Tower', *London Mercury*, December 1938, pp. 119-30.

CHAPTER II

NOVELISTS

§ 1. *H. G. Wells*

WITHOUT THE Marshalsea prison and the blacking factory there would have been no Dickens. Without the underground kitchen, the broken boots, and 'the valley of the shadow of education', there would have been no H. G. Wells. Had Dickens been born in Belgrave Square he might still have written novels; but would they have been equally remarkable? If H. G. Wells as a child had worn the beautiful suits of little Lord Fauntleroy and gone to the best of preparatory schools, his inquiring mind might still have probed uncomfortably into the consciousness of his generation; but would he have set out to re-fashion the world in a manner so comprehensive as to attract attention in both hemispheres?

Herbert George Wells, born in 1866 at a little 'general shop' in Bromley, Kent, was the son of a professional cricketer in the Kent county team. His mother, daughter of an innkeeper, served as a lady's-maid, and the early chapters of *Tono-Bungay* depict something of the life of servants of the upper classes in the days before the great houses of England dwindled. H. G. Wells spent his childhood in a period when basement-rooms were a feature of suburban domestic architecture in England, and in a glimpse of his early life he is seen as a dweller in the underground:

A very considerable part of my childhood was spent in an underground kitchen; the window opened upon a bricked-in space, surmounted by a grating before my father's shop window. So that, when I looked out of the window, instead of seeing—as children of a higher upbringing would do—the heads and bodies of people, I saw their underside. I got acquainted indeed with all sorts of social types as boots simply, indeed, as

the soles of boots; and only subsequently and with care, have I fitted heads, bodies, and legs to these pediments.¹

In the further course of this essay—which develops into a passionate socialist tract—the child H. G. Wells is shown suffering many of the disabilities that befall the family of a small tradesman whose business is drifting into bankruptcy. The author tells of sore feet due to over-darned socks; of the knots of broken laces; of over-trodden heels; of split and flapping soles. From this description of the state of young Wells's boots, it was safe to infer without other evidence that the rest of his circumstances were in similar disrepair. The English parent at that time had a profound regard for the social implications of good boots, and broken footwear customarily followed and did not precede outworn clothing and inadequate food.

Mental clothing, however, is more important than a well-preserved suit, and the misery of boots was not the final blow. In the first chapter of *The History of Mr. Polly* (1910), Polly suffers under the type of muddled and mind-deadening schooling that was the common lot of young people of Wells's class in the early days of State education. When Wells emerged at fourteen from what he calls 'the valley of the shadow of education', there followed the purgatory of 'the drapery'. He was apprenticed to a draper in Windsor and, later, to another in Southsea. From recollections of those years, came several of Wells's best novels. When current problems of sociology, of international relationships and of religion (discussed at length in Wells's later books) have become insignificant in the face of newer problems, there will remain the joyous misadventures of Mr. Kipps, of Mr. Polly, and of Mr. Hoopdriver.² The 'little man'—later to be the hero of popular strip-cartoons in the national newspapers—came amusingly and pathetically into English fiction in these stories.

¹ *This Misery of Boots*, a Fabian Society tract (1905). Reprinted in *A Miscellany of Tracts and Pamphlets (World's Classics)*.

² In *The Wheels of Chance* (1896).

At the age of sixteen, when H. G. Wells had already augmented his early schooling sufficiently to obtain a teacher's post at Midhurst Grammar School, he broke his indentures and fled from the drapery for ever. In building up a composite picture of Wells as a young man, some characteristics of the hero of *Love and Mr. Lewisham* (1900) are of interest. Mr. Lewisham is eighteen, an assistant schoolmaster in Sussex, earning forty pounds a year, and 'called "Mr." to distinguish him from the bigger boys'.

He wore ready-made clothes, his black jacket of rigid line was dusted about the front and sleeves with scholastic chalk, and his face was downy and his moustache incipient. He was a passable-looking youngster of eighteen, fair-haired, indifferently barbered, and with a quite unnecessary pair of glasses on his fairly prominent nose—he wore these to make himself look older, that discipline might be maintained.

Mr. Lewisham is an ambitious young man. On his bedroom wall hung a time-table mapping out his intended progress through life, and among his aims was a London University degree with 'hons. in all subjects'. His creator did less well. After qualifying for a scholarship at the old Normal School of Science, South Kensington, Wells graduated as B.Sc. with first-class honours in zoology, and subsequently went as assistant-master to Henley House School, St. John's Wood, in north-west London. There followed experience as tutor, lecturer, and demonstrator—with incursions into journalism—preceding a serious illness which took him out of the sphere of formal education. In 1893 he turned wholly to journalism and authorship, and two years later published his first novel, *The Time Machine*, a strikingly original book, marked by a gift of vision and a command of clear and vigorous English.

In the following forty years Wells wrote scores of books—a plain statement that is in itself a damning piece of criticism. His career might be described as 'The Tragedy of a Novelist', with Over-production as the villain. The

list of his books includes treatises upon love and marriage, science and religion, peace and war; sociology, biology, politics; angels and mermaids, astronomy and world-history; the old world and new worlds to come; and even children's games. No human being can successfully emulate Atlas and take the weight of all this unintelligible world on to his shoulders; yet it is purposeless as criticism merely to bewail Wells's apparently wasteful dispersion of energy. Literature is undoubtedly poorer because the later Wells was unlike his former self; and it is probably true that *The History of Mr. Polly* will still be read with pleasure when *The World of William Clissold* (1926) and its successors have become an undisturbed anchorage for library cobwebs. The annual duplication of Kippes and Pollys, however, would not have made Wells the significant figure that he was in early twentieth-century England. His eager, restless, inquiring mind unsettled him for orthodox fiction as the years went on. Though it is possible to believe that there is as much sound social criticism in the dyspepsia of Alfred Polly as in the diatribes of Clissold, it would be mistaken to suppose that the change in Wells's literary manner after 1910 was produced by a decay of creative energy. The change was in fact due—at least in the first place—to a deliberate departure from methods that had previously satisfied him; it was as definite an act of renunciation as that of any medieval knight who determined to forsake life's pleasures for the rigours of a holy crusade.

Wells's manifesto of change (his essay on *The Contemporary Novel*¹) proclaimed the intention to abandon the 'Weary Giant theory' which posited that the novel was wholly and solely a means of relaxation, a harmless opiate for vacant hours and vacant minds. He also expressed dissent from the theory that the novel has an established form, in the sense in which a sonnet has form. 'The parade of ideas in this essay is so significant in relation to Wells's

¹ First printed in the *Fortnightly Review* (Nov. 1911); afterwards included in *An Englishman Looks at the World* (1914).

later novels that it might usefully be printed as a preface to each of these, in order to short-circuit the repeated complaint that his later novels were not of the regular type—a type he had explicitly abandoned. It is allowable to dissent from his theories and to dislike intensely the resultant product, but, before judgment, the theories require consideration. The main principles laid down in this manifesto of the New Fiction were: (a) That the novel is in essence a discursive thing, a woven tapestry of multifarious interests; (b) That it should be made sufficiently elastic in form to take the whole of life within its compass—‘business and finance and politics and precedence and pretentiousness and decorum and undecorum, until a thousand pretences and ten thousand impostures shrivel in the cold, clear air of our elucidations’; (c) That it should be, not a new sort of pulpit, but ‘the home confessional, the initiator of knowledge, the seed of fruitful self-questioning’, the great central platform for discussion and for the examination of human conduct.

To reply in terms of what the nineteenth century thought about the novel is useless. The kind of writing preferred by Wells after 1911 is not, indeed, ‘THE NOVEL’; but it is *his* Idea of the Novel—and he claims as the master of this discursive school Laurence Sterne, ‘the subtlest and greatest *artist*,’ he says, ‘that Great Britain has ever produced in all that is essentially the novel’.

The essay on *The Contemporary Novel* is illuminating also for its indications of the change of outlook between the Victorians and Wells’s own generation. He instances the passing away of the old ‘feeling of certitude about moral values and standards of conduct’, the old conviction that ‘your sect, whichever sect you belonged to, knew the whole of truth and included all the nice people’. In place of these certitudes and convictions had come ‘a penetrating and pervading element of doubt and curiosity and charity’, an assertion of initiative against organization, of freedom against discipline. The insistence laid upon the need for

a nation-wide spirit of inquiry and experiment, makes this essay noteworthy as a spontaneous expression of the state of mind which dominated the Age of Interrogation. Wells himself, however, was to live on into a time when political certitude swept back with renewed and brutal energy, when discipline became again an article of faith, and freedom seemed about to become a vanished dream. His view of the future outlook for mankind (as expressed in, e.g., *The Fate of Homo Sapiens*, 1939) was then tinged with little hope, unless the human race fundamentally changed its ideals and habits.

Before any definite formulation of literary principles was undertaken by H. G. Wells, he had for some years been reaching out towards a new method. His fiction (apart from short stories) may be divided into (i) *fantastic and imaginative romances*; (ii) *novels of character and humour*; and (iii) *discussion novels*. Group (i) belongs mainly to the period between 1895 and 1908, and it was usual at one time to liken these imaginative romances to the stories of Jules Verne, though (as can now be seen) there was very little likeness. Whereas fantastic adventurousness counted for everything in Jules Verne, in Wells it was little more than a peg upon which to hang speculation and social inquiry. He endeavoured, as it were, to step away from life and look at it from such a distance as made possible a clear and proportionate view in perspective. He seems to suggest in these books that we—being inside ourselves and all too close to our neighbours—are no more able to see the effect of life's whole picture than if we stood with our eyes only half an inch away from the surface of a Post-Impressionist painting. The first step towards the cure of social muddles and disabilities is to see civilization in the mass and not in disjointed fragments. Equipped with an alert and rich imagination, H. G. Wells strove constantly to see life from an appropriate distance. So, in the fantastic romances, he established his viewpoint (by turns) in the moon, in the past, in the future, in the air; he looked at life through

the eyes of a mermaid, of an angel, of giants: by these and similar devices labouring to prevail against common human limitations, and see mankind and its works clearly in the round. *The Wonderful Visit* (1895) provides comprehensive questioning through the lips of the wounded angel, who inquires closely about orthodox habits and observances so familiar to us as to seem beyond question—yet so fantastic to a citizen of heaven as to suggest a wild and incredible madness among men. The angel (a precursor of the Age of Interrogation) demands to know the why and wherefore; but his host, the Vicar of Siddermorton, finds that there is no discoverable why or wherefore; that he and his people are obeying customs and conventions without reason, even without consciousness. And the dilemma of the vicar becomes the dilemma of the attentive reader also.

The process of asking *Why?*—and, in other connexions, *Why not?*—was the first step in Wells's crusade against 'emphatic, cocksure, and unteachable' people; and the fantastic romances form an integral part of the whole body of his work, because of their challenging spirit of inquiry and criticism.

The second group—*novels of character and humour*—overlaps groups (i) and (iii) in point of time, and includes books which, without addition, would have sufficed to make Wells a notable figure in English literature. Polly, at least, is a memorable comic character who is also the embodiment of those bewildered and exasperated souls thrown up by modern civilization and stranded on the beach of life. He is an almost tragic civilization-crippled and frustrated genius; yet his pathetic and his tragic qualities merge into and increase his comic stature.

In *The Contemporary Novel* Wells says: 'I find all the novels of Dickens, long as they are, too short for me'; and in a later passage, commending Bumble, he adds, 'but it is not only caricature and satire I demand'. These references to Dickens raise questions in regard to the methods of

Wells and Dickens as social reformers. The effectiveness of Dickens's method lay in the fact that he made iniquitous officialdom appear not only wicked but ridiculous also—and the conviction that they are ridiculous reforms wrongdoers more effectually than the conviction that they are wicked. Not only were caricature and satire Dickens's most powerful weapons, they were also the most effective weapons he could possibly choose.

Under the laughter of Polly and Kipps (as already suggested) there is the grim face of Wells the reformer. In its own way, the humorous picture of Polly's education is as unforgettable as the Dotheboys Hall episodes; and the system indicted appears as unforgivable. When he wrote *Joan and Peter* (1918), eight years after *The History of Mr. Polly*, H. G. Wells interrogated the English educational system in a more elaborate but less impressive way. Throwing aside the weapons of humour and satire, he became merely bad-tempered—and bad temper is the worst possible equipment for a reformer. Oswald Sydenham (like Philip Rylands in *Meanwhile*, 1927), travels about England in a state of peevish indignation, producing his Catechism for Schoolmasters with an air that would exasperate any schoolmaster. And this tendency towards peevishness is the bane of several of Wells's novels from *Joan and Peter* onwards. When he laughed at abuses he was a second Dickens; when he grew fretful over them, he became a second-rate edition of himself. And he was perhaps the first of that army of propagandist writers that, more particularly in the nineteen-thirties, endeavoured to hector rather than to persuade and convince.

The group of *discussion novels* began after *Tono-Bungay* (1909), the most notable piece of fiction produced by Wells. It is the central point at which all his competing interests meet and unite in proportion and harmony. *Tono-Bungay* stands beside *The Forsyte Saga* as a diagnosis (though from another angle) of the break-up of English society during the second half of the nineteenth century. In these books

the authors survey the disintegration of the old-time strongholds of tradition and privilege—Galsworthy with a glance of pity; Wells with a glance of half-doubtful satisfaction—interrogative still; asking, by implication: 'Is Lichtenstein better than Lord Drew?' *Tono-Bungay*, a sprawling and shapeless narrative ('an agglomeration . . . without discipline', as the narrator confesses), stands with the later novels as an exercise in the discursive method, but its social diagnosis is inseparable from the fascinating characters and the swift-moving story. This book is a forceful presentation of a problem of importance in modern England: the outgoing of the aristocracy—the 'Quality'—and the incoming of moneyed charlatans and adventurers. 'The last sad squires ride slowly towards the sea'—and what comes? England's insufficiency in this process of social replacement is the substance of H. G. Wells's charge in *Tono-Bungay*. The great merit of the book as a piece of literary art is that the characters themselves state and illustrate the social theme; the author is veiled in their personalities, and does not himself lecture as from a platform. Aunt Susan, 'round-eyed, button-nosed, pink-and-white Aunt Susan', with a faint ghost of a lisp and a nonsensically derisive attitude towards the world in general, is a fine piece of humorous portraiture; she is intensely real and likeable in her bewilderment as she bobbles from comparative poverty into affluence on a sea of patent medicine.

The theories set out in *The Contemporary Novel* explain Wells's intention and achievement in most of his novels after 1911. Each successive volume marked a phase in his long inquiry as to the aims and ideals of civilized man engaged in the Human Adventure. Everything that man does was, to Wells, a subject for ceaseless interrogation. He looked upon the civilization of his period as a system 'perpetually swaying and quivering and beading and sagging'. Would the whole vast accidental edifice come smashing down? 'Why shouldn't it?' he asked in 1909. By 1925 (after the World War and the failure of post-war

reconstruction) he was occupied with the idea of mankind's progress towards the One World-State, which he then regarded as the next stage on the road of human development. Towards that One World-State he was urging men to work, saying:

'There was a time when men lived for a noble tomb and in order to leave sweet and great memories behind them; soon it will matter nothing to a man and his work to know that he will probably die in a ditch—misunderstood. So long as he gets the work done.'

'With no last judgment ever to vindicate him,' said Devizes.

'That will not matter in the least to him.'

'I agree. Some of us begin to feel like that even now.'¹

It was a long pilgrimage from the general shop in Bromley, Kent, to the One World-State; but the pilgrimage was continuous. Without the knowledge of what children in underground kitchens suffered from 'this misery of boots' the vision of the One World-State might have seemed less urgent. It was a vision too wide and comprehensive for the majority—an abstraction so vast as to be meaningless even to millions who shared Wells's desire to rid the world of miseries and hatreds and jealousies and wars. But if, in 1925, Mr. Polly was closer to men's hearts than was the One World-State, the fault, if fault it was, may have been less that of H. G. Wells than of mankind in general, which then found it possible to love the least of its fellow creatures more readily than it could love even the noblest of political ideas. In the nineteen-thirties, however, creeds loomed larger than men. Internationalism, of which Wells was a tireless advocate, was regarded by fanatical leaders of self-glorifying nations as a criminal heresy, not as a noble ideal. Amid this backward rush towards barbarism, the fervour and industry of Wells as a prophet never relaxed. Much of his work was merely ephemeral, journalism for a day. With *The Outline of History* (1920) he had started a

¹ *Christina Alberta's Father* (1925): Bk. III, ch. 4, § v.

vogue for sweeping surveys of man's past and achievements; *The Work, Wealth, and Happiness of Mankind* (1932) and *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) again showed his interest in perspectives. But he offered in these bulky works more than the popular mind could digest. His literary style gave no assistance, for he had lost his early verbal economy and now usually preferred to employ ten words to do the work of one.

§ 2. *Arnold Bennett*

There is a class of novelists, rarer in England than in France, to whom the first principle in literary creation is *that this world is nothing but a spectacle*, which it is the novelist's task to record with complete detachment—looking on, but making no sound of either approval or protest. It is obvious that H. G. Wells's purpose as a writer had never been to report human affairs dispassionately. He ranks as an active and impassioned participant and protestant, not an observer merely. Arnold Bennett's purpose was very different. His masters, in the early stages of his development, were the French novelists, Maupassant, Flaubert, and Balzac, and his aim was to record life—its delights, its indignities, distresses—without conscious intrusion of his own personality between the record and the reader. Like his French masters, he was a copyist of life, and only indirectly (if at all) a commentator, an interpreter, or an apologist.

The moral sense—and more especially the emotional sense—of the Victorian English novelists would have caused them to shrink from the idea of 'detachment'. They would not have understood (nor have thought it proper to attempt to understand) a writer who regarded a wife-beater and a nursing mother as equally interesting. But the wife-beater and the nursing mother are both part of the human spectacle; therefore, in a detached and dispassionate rendering of life in the novel, account has to be taken of both. A cinematograph camera does not register indignation over

the wife-beater, nor become lyrical over the nursing mother: it records both without passion or prejudice. The resulting pictures are a faithful representation of two aspects of life, and audiences are at liberty to adopt whatever attitude they choose; to find, it may be, the one distressing and the other ennobling. But with the distress, as with the ennoblement, the camera is unconcerned.

The purpose of the 'naturalistic' novelist, so-called, is to be as dispassionate and detached as a camera. It is often said that ugliness results from this method, but it might be answered that, to a completely naturalistic novelist (if such a one exist), there can be no ugliness as such—but only varying manifestations of life¹ to be recorded as they are seen. But that answer would be an inadequate apology. No 'naturalistic' novelist can record the whole of life; nor the whole of any one life; nor the whole, even, of any one extended period of any one life. He is compelled himself to determine the nature of his picture of life, because (unable to include everything) he must select certain things as relevant and significant, rejecting others as irrelevant and without significance. And it is in the process of selection and rejection that naturalism breaks down. The naturalism of real life depends in a measure upon the empty interspaces between life's 'significant' periods. Neither the novelist nor the dramatist can afford to attempt to indicate these empty interspaces, because tedium is the essential characteristic of such periods in human experience, and tedium is fatal to art. The few instances on record where a complete and positive naturalism has been attempted, have resulted in overwhelming dullness;² while, in other

¹ 'Probably no works have been more abused for ugliness than Huysman's', which 'reproduced with exasperation what is generally regarded as the sordid ugliness of commonplace daily life. Yet . . . it is inconceivable that Huysman . . . was not ravished by the secret beauty of his subjects and did not exult in it.'—Arnold Bennett: *The Author's Craft* (1914): Part 2, II.

² Cf. comments on James Joyce and Dorothy Richardson: *post*, pp. 62-3.

instances, novelists so feared to distort their picture by making life seem too pleasant that they tended to eliminate too much joy and too little pain. 99910

Arnold Bennett's method was frequently described as naturalistic, though it was only partially so. It is true that as he looked upon the world he was not obsessed by life's injustices; nor was he a tormented soul driven to attempt to build a new world or to evolve a new race of creatures to inhabit it. He stood in the Age of Interrogation as, apparently, a detached figure; but his detachment was not that of an 'unconcerned spectator' of life. He was merely detached, as an artist, from the current habit of protest and the current passion for utilizing creative literature as an instrument of moral and social reform.

Though he repudiated the naturalistic convention,¹ he nevertheless followed it in part. Another writer might be content to remark, 'Rachel lit the gas', but Arnold Bennett describes the simple act in minute detail in a passage five hundred words long.² While he was, intellectually, well qualified for the naturalistic method, he was temperamentally incapable of sustaining it. Life was not, for him, a spectacle merely. He became easily and delightedly conscious that it is a *wonderful* spectacle, a *thrilling* spectacle, a *fascinating* spectacle, an *awesome* spectacle. Trifles became charged with a tremendous, an apocalyptic significance. Two boys spitting over a canal bridge on the day that one of them leaves school for the last time are made symbolic of the battle of youth against 'the leagued universe'.³ Sophia Baines refuses to take a dose of castor oil ordered by her mother: 'It was a historic moment in the family life. Mrs. Baines thought the last day had come. But still she held herself in dignity while the apocalypse roared in her ears.'⁴ A girl holds out a lighted spill: 'The gesture with which she modestly offered the spill was angelic; it

¹ 'The notion that "naturalists" have at last lighted on a final formula which ensures truth to life is ridiculous.'—*The Author's Craft*, ch. 2, IV.

² *The Price of Love* (1914): ch. I, i.

³ *Clayhanger*: Bk. I, ch. i.

⁴ *The Old Wives' Tale*: Bk. I, ch. 3.

was divine; it was one of those phenomena which persist in a man's memory for decades. At the very instant of its happening he knew that he should never forget it.¹ A slatternly servant-girl in the rain with an apron of sacking protecting her head, is presented as idealistically as if she were a celestial visitor wearing a bridal veil.² But, lest such passages as these should stamp him too definitely as the romantic he was by temperament, Arnold Bennett 'naturalized' his novels by a somewhat disproportionate attention to disease and physical decay. In a final analysis, however, it is not life as a drab and depressing spectacle, nor as a well-balanced spectacle of good and ill together, that is the dominant vision in his best books. It is, rather, life as a spectacle in which almost every sensation and every phenomenon is interpreted romantically: 'sweet, exquisite, blissful melancholy';³ 'The incandescent gas-burner of the street-lamp outside had been turned down, as it was turned down every night! If it is possible to love such a phenomenon, she loved that phenomenon. That phenomenon was a portion of her life, dear to her.'⁴

Arnold Bennett's insistence upon the wonderment of life is partly an unnecessary stressing of an obvious truth, supported by evidence that is often irrelevant (and still more often inadequate to prove his case if it were in need of proof); and, partly, it is a relic of his provincialism. He strove, with much success, to become the sophisticated man of the world who knows all the ins and outs of life, and to reach that degree of knowingness when each sly dig and wink is comprehended. Yet he never became altogether urbanized, nor ceased to be one of modern literature's country cousins—the man to whom all things are astounding. Life never lost its glamour for him. He could not regret the passing of the glory and the grandeur of Greece and Rome, for he found full recompense in the

¹ *The Price of Love*: ch. 4, iii.

² *Riceman Steps*: Part I, vii.

³ *The Old Wives' Tale*: Bk. III; ch. i, ii.

⁴ *The Old Wives' Tale*: Bk. IV, ch. i, iv.

modern everyday life of the Five Towns, his native district, upon which he conferred an almost legendary impressiveness. Next to Hardy's Wessex, Bennett's Five Towns was the most notable addition to the atlas of topographical fiction since Trollope and the Brontës.

Born at Shelton on the outskirts of Hanley, Staffordshire, in 1867, Enoch Arnold Bennett as a child lived behind a draper's shop ('Baines', in his novels). Educated at local schools, he matriculated at London University, and was a London solicitor's clerk at the age of twenty-one. Next, after receiving twenty guineas for a humorous story in *Tit-bits*, he became a free-lance journalist; contributed short stories to evening papers and to literary quarterlies; and became assistant-editor (afterwards editor) of *Woman*, for which he wrote 'smart society' paragraphs under the name of 'Gwendolen'. In various ways, that paper enabled him to get the insight into the 'secret nature of women' which he afterwards turned to account in his novels. From 1900 Arnold Bennett lived in France for nearly eight years, steeping himself in French literature. He died in London in 1931. His naïve enjoyment of society and good living were misinterpreted by those who thought him smug and bloated with success. He was an abundant and generous creature who held out both hands to life. The best impression of his character is to be obtained from the posthumously published *Journals of Arnold Bennett* (1932-3).

His books were numerous and their quality unequal. Three novels, *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908), *Clayhanger* (1910),¹ and *Riceman Steps* (1923), place him high among English novelists; *Buried Alive* (1908) and *The Card* (1911) are first-rate humorous character-novels, *The Grand Babylon Hotel* (1902) an entertaining and well-written extravaganza. His reputation was made and maintained by the first three

¹ *Clayhanger*, the first part of a trilogy, was followed by *Hilda Lessways* (1911), and completed with *These Twain* (1916); since collected in one volume (1925) as *The Clayhanger Family*.

books named above, but *Buried Alive* is a little masterpiece that deserves more attention than it has received (it was later turned into a successful play, *The Great Adventure*).

The Five Towns of Arnold Bennett's works are the Staffordshire pottery towns which constitute the federated borough of Stoke-on-Trent. Before 1908 there were five separate towns: Tunstall, Burslem, Hanley, Stoke-upon-Trent, and Longton, appearing in Bennett's books as Turnhill, Bursley, Hanbridge, Knype, and Longshaw; while Oldcastle is the town of Newcastle-under-Lyne.

It is in this small area that the people of *The Old Wives' Tale*, *The Clayhanger Family*, and other books spend most part of their lives. Readers become familiar not only with the principal streets and buildings and landmarks, but also with the men and women who walked the streets, inhabited the buildings, and looked admiringly upon the landmarks. The lifelike quality of Bennett's novels is obtained by an accumulation of carefully chosen detail. Some ugliness and coarseness are essential to his plan. He saw ugliness as part of the pattern of life; and the pattern of life without this element was too threadbare to interest him.

The Old Wives' Tale is a long panorama of the lives of two sisters, Constance and Sophia Baines, who—first seen in girlhood full of surging hope and vigour and the fire of youth—have both died in advanced age before the end of the book, which combines humour and tragedy, pathos and indignity, beauty and ugliness. Excellent character-drawing abounds, and the trivial incidents are as interesting as the great events. Sophia and Constance did not realize, says the author on the first page, that they were living in a district pulsating with interest; and at no time were they fully awake to the tremendousness of their own sensations. Though Constance did on occasion discover wonder in her domestic affairs, Sophia, even in the turmoil of the Siege of Paris, was hardly conscious of living through strange and terrible days. But what *they* looked upon as commonplace, Arnold Bennett regarded as full of lively

and romantic possibilities. To any one who might suggest that *The Old Wives' Tale* is drab and prosy stuff, he would have replied: "On the contrary, this is *life*; and life is always marvellous."

There are few lovable characters in *The Old Wives' Tale*, but *Clayhanger* has a population of fine, friendly people. Edwin Clayhanger, the outwardly commonplace son of a Bursley printer, is one of those few in literature who, without loss of individuality, embody much general human experience. Most young Englishmen of a particular mentality have experienced the feelings which beset Edwin, and he contributes largely to the convincing effect of the book. In addition to Edwin there is the attractive Orgreave family, fortunate in the harmony of its members. And who can forget good, solid, sensible Maggie (Edwin's sister) and the inimitable Auntie Hamps?

Shortly after the *Clayhanger* trilogy was completed, Arnold Bennett determined to close the Five Towns series, and to work in a wider field. The novels which followed suggested that, in leaving his own people, he had sacrificed too much. He recovered much of his former power, however, in *Riceyman Steps*, in which a decrepit district on the edge of the City of London is made as vivid as anything in the Five Towns books. *Riceyman Steps* is not so full as Bennett's two masterpieces, and he was not able here to reveal the characters with so intimate an understanding as that which marks the Baineses, the Clayhangers and the Orgreaves. Yet Elsie—a slatternly servant-girl outwardly, but inwardly an angel of light—is a beautiful piece of character-drawing. It is she who gives the novel its chief claim to eminence; though there is also much merit in its descriptive passages. And nowhere else does Arnold Bennett succeed so well in communicating the exact atmosphere of a place as in his description of Riceyman Square 'frowsily supine in a needed Sunday indolence after the week's hard labour.'¹ *Riceyman Steps*, though well received

¹ *Riceyman Steps*, Part 1, X.

by the public and admired by other writers, was regarded by some as only a dismal book about dismal people in dismal surroundings. That, however, is a superficial judgment. Despite its drabness, the book is illumined by that 'sense of beauty—indispensable to the creative artist',¹ which is the soul of Bennett's novels. He said that the foundation of the novelist's equipment is 'universal sympathy';² and his possession of some measure of universal sympathy enabled him to see beauty almost everywhere and to endow commonplace people with transfiguring interest.

In *The Old Wives' Tale*, *The Clayhanger Family*, and others of Arnold Bennett's novels, the historical and social background is sketched in with considerable skill, and with a sounder appreciation of what is really significant than he showed, elsewhere, in his over-insistence upon the 'significance' of trifling objects. In *Clayhanger* the narrative is made forceful and convincing by allusions to contemporary events, and these allusions are wide in their range, covering politics, religion, literature, and other interests.³ Their effect is to give the story a 'living' sense that is absent from any piece of imaginative writing where the characters seem to be suspended (historically) in a vacuum. Other writers have adopted this device of a panoramic background, but the result is not always happy.⁴

Arnold Bennett's last novel *Imperial Palace* (1930) was written to support his view that English novelists had

¹ *The Author's Craft*, Part 2, II.

² *Ibid.*, Part 2, V.

³ The chapter (*Clayhanger*, Book I, ch. iv) which describes Darius's experiences as a child in the grip of the factory system in early nineteenth-century industrial England, is an impressive piece of re-creation, though, being a digression, it might be regarded as an artistic fault.

⁴ The several effects of the use of this device can be seen in some of Rose Macaulay's novels, and in Beatrice Kean Seymour's *The Hopeful Journey*. In H. G. Wells's later books it is much more than a background—it is foreground and middle-distance as well—and he and other writers in the nineteen-thirties went far towards turning the novel into a merely journalistic running commentary on matters of the moment.

given disproportionate attention to personal and emotional relationships and not enough to the interest taken by men and women in their daily work. In *Imperial Palace* the intricate organization of a vast hotel is displayed in detail which some readers found fascinating and enthralling, others intolerably boring. But though the hotel is the central theme, there is no neglect of romantic human interest in this book, which is as abundant and generous and amoral as its creator.

§ 3. *John Galsworthy*

John Galsworthy, who came of a Devonshire family, was born at Combe in Surrey in 1867; educated at Harrow and Oxford; and called to the Bar in 1890. He practised little, but his legal knowledge is evident throughout his work, especially in *Justice* and in the court scene in *The Silver Spoon*. He travelled widely, but of this there is little evidence in his books.

If no biographical facts were available about any one of the three, it would be easy to deduce from a consideration of their literary styles that Wells and Bennett were plebeians and Galsworthy an aristocrat. For all his careful craftsmanship, Arnold Bennett's prose sometimes (and that of H. G. Wells frequently) shows traces of being 'puffy' and out of condition. There is an occasional air of fussiness about the writing. But though it may be true that Galsworthy, in his choice of subject, was at times suggestive of a well-meaning but over-anxious aunt, his style has assurance and repose. His sentences are crisp, clear-cut, athletic, and free from the adiposity of a good deal of prose in his day. This feature of his literary style is of advantage in his novels, but less so in his plays.¹ It clears his pages of what Pater called 'surplusage', and gives a sense of progression and narrative swiftness to books not especially rich in incident. Galsworthy occasionally produced passages of striking

¹ For discussion of this point see *post*, p. 105.

beauty, and created a curious sense of *abstract* Beauty suspended in a clear, ethereal atmosphere. This effect is obtained in parts of *The Country House* (1907), *The Patrician* (1911), and *The Forsyte Saga* (1922), especially in the passage describing Old Jolyon's death.¹ Galsworthy's lucent prose may keep his novels alive long after they have become stale as social commentaries. Their 'dating' in that respect had begun before his death in 1933.

Galsworthy's purposes as a novelist were stated by himself in *The Inn of Tranquillity* (1912). *A Novelist's Allegory*, in that book, introduces a figure, Cethru, whose function in the allegory is parallel to what Galsworthy regarded as the function of the novelist in the modern world. Cethru is charged by the Prince of Felicitas to go all his life up and down the dark street (*Vita Publica*) bearing a lantern, so that wayfarers may see whither they are going and avoid danger in the darkness. The light shed by Cethru's lantern compels the citizens to act against evils previously unseen and unchecked. The man with the lantern is hated and persecuted, because he disturbs the complacent people. He does not himself observe the abuses he reveals to others; nor assist in quelling those abuses. He is the light-bearer, Cethru (*See-Through*)—the man through whose ministry others are compelled to see. He is at length arraigned before the judges for disturbing 'good citizens by showing to them without provocation disagreeable sights' and endangering 'the laws by causing persons to desire to change them'. The defence of Cethru is that his lantern distorted nothing, it 'did but show that which was there, both fair and foul, no more, no less'. His advocate continues:

Surely, reverend Judges, being just men, you would not have this lanthorn turn its light away from what is ragged and ugly because there are also fair things on which its light may fall. . . . And I would have you note, Sirs, that by this impartial discovery of the proportions of one thing to another, this lanthorn

¹ *The Forsyte Saga*: Interlude—*Indian Summer of a Forsyte*.

'Well! you see,' the old man explained to me, 'the dog came smellin' round my stones an' it wouldn' come near an' it wouldn' go away; it was all froth and blood about the jaw, and its eyes glared green at me. I thought to meself, bein' the dog-days—I don't like the look o' you, you look funny! So I took a stone an' got it here, just on the ear; an' it fell over. And I thought to meself: "Well, you've got to finish it, or it'll go bitin' somebody, for sure!" But when I come to it with my hammer, the dog it got up—an' you know how it is when there's somethin' you've 'alf killed, and you feel sorry and yet you feel you must finish it, an' you hit at it blind, you hit at it agen an' agen. The poor thing, it wriggled an' snapped, an' I was terrified it'd bite me, and some'ow it got away!'

A farmer afterwards wounded the puppy with a pitchfork because he was afraid it would bite his lambs. And in the middle of the night the wretched, hunted, harmless animal died in agony, in the house of the kind-hearted man who finally took it in and tended it—but too late. The little mealy-coloured mongrel was hunted to death, not by any vindictiveness of men (those who ill-used it were, at heart, kindly and protective), but by Fear, 'the black god-mother of all damnable things', working through hag-ridden human beings.

Most of those who maltreated or drove off the puppy were actuated by fear moving them to guard their own possessions. At the root of their fear was the possessive instinct, an idea which led up to Galsworthy's outstanding book, the series of novels and stories collectively named *The Forsyte Saga*, beginning with *The Man of Property*. The central character, Soames Forsyte, obsessed by the lust of possession, cannot overcome his passion to acquire everything desirable within his reach. By marriage, he acquired Irene Hron. He over-persuaded her into marrying him, but the result was disastrous, and 'the profound, subtle aversion which he felt in his wife was a mystery to him and a source of the most terrible irritation'. But he was a 'man of property' and his wife was a property to be subjected to the exercise of full proprietary rights. Soames

was at that time a selfish, acquisitive creature who could not endure beauty near him unless it was crushed and pinned in the specimen-case which was his house. Yet even here Galsworthy adduces the evidence for Soames—such as it is—through the thoughts of young Jolyon, who is less stultified by Forsyte prejudice and arrogance than most of his family. Young Jolyon meditates upon the deadlock in the Soames household:

Whence should a man like his cousin, saturated with all the prejudices and beliefs of his class, draw the insight or inspiration necessary to break up this life? It was a question of imagination, of projecting himself into the future beyond the unpleasant gossip, sneers, and tattle that followed on such separations, beyond the passing pangs that the lack of the sight of her would cause, beyond the grave disapproval of the worthy. But few men, and especially few men of Soames's class, had imagination enough for that. A deal of mortals in this world, and not enough imagination to go round! . . . Most people would consider such a marriage as that of Soames and Irene quite fairly successful; he had money, she had beauty; it was a case for compromise. There was no reason why they should not jog along, even if they hated each other. . . . Half the marriages of the upper classes were conducted on these lines: Do not offend the susceptibilities of Society; do not offend the susceptibilities of the Church. To avoid offending these is worth the sacrifice of any private feelings. The advantages of the stable home are visible, tangible, so many pieces of property; there is no risk in the *statu quo*. To break up the home is at the best a dangerous experiment, and selfish into the bargain.¹

Such is the evidence, in defence of Soames. Galsworthy delivers no judgment, but here, again, in this earlier part of the *Saga*, an emotional current runs against Soames. As the long record proceeds, however, an interesting change is apparent. In the course of over twenty years in the bosom of the Forsyte family, Galsworthy's feelings mellowed in one respect and were exasperated afresh in another. For a long

¹ Book I, pt. 2, ch. x.

time Soames Forsyte the Victorian was (metaphorically) in the dock, with the Younger (Edwardian) Generation in the jury-box. The jury was determined to be fair and to hear all the evidence, but it was stern, nevertheless, and implacable. In the second cycle of the *Saga*¹ a different figure stood in the dock: it was the Youngest Generation (the Neo-Georgian), Eton-cropped and rouged. The Edwardians were still in the jury-box, but with their faces lined by perplexity and regret. Soames Forsyte the Victorian, now a benevolent old gentleman, is seen seated quietly in the well of the court. On the bench is Galsworthy, remarking sadly to the defendant, 'Young woman, in my earlier days it used to be said that your Victorian grandfather was an undesirable person. I am now being very reluctantly forced toward the conclusion that, compared with you, he was a perfect gentleman.'

But even if Galsworthy had become uneasy about the future of Fleur Forsyte, and indignant about the present of such as Marjorie Ferrar,² he was still able to understand and sympathize with young people of the early twentieth century who were animated by the restless spirit of the Age of Interrogation. The mentality of that Age has seldom been stated more lucidly than by Galsworthy in his analysis of Felix Freeland's young daughter, Nedda. He speaks of 'the ceaseless questioning that was always going on within her; the thirst to know why this was and that was not. . . . Why, when people wrote and talked of God, they seemed to know what He was, and she never did? Why people had to suffer; and the world be black to so many millions? Why one could not love more than one man at a time? Why—a thousand things? . . .'

§ 4. *Joseph Conrad*

Joseph Conrad had clear advantages over his English contemporaries. Though England became his home and

¹ Beginning with *The White Monkey* (1924).

² See *The Silver Spoon* (1926).

Englishmen his friends, he was not limited in outlook or sympathy by national or racial consciousness. Poland and England meant much to him, but his experiences on the sea and in many lands made him a man of no one country, though he retained a strong spiritual attachment to Poland, which he revisited in 1914.¹ It is almost literally true to say that Conrad was a citizen of the world. His Malays and Borneans, Swedes and Englishmen, Germans and Dutch were all, alike, children of the human family, with some superficial differences but with more fundamental resemblances. H. G. Wells's endeavour to establish a world-outlook was a conscious and deliberate effort, and he did not cease to be, temperamentally, a twentieth-century Englishman. Conrad, as a writer, had no narrow allegiances from which to free himself: his interests were as wide as the world, and his outlook was, in that sense, universal. His Dain Maroola is no more 'foreign' than his Axel Heyst or Captain Anthony. And no *less* foreign. It would be true to say that Conrad's characters are all 'foreign', in a special sense. They move in a remote atmosphere, although they are actuated by the common passions of humanity. Their stature is heroic and, therefore, unlike the common stature. Captain MacWhirr in *Typhoon* (1903), is dull, unimaginative, a fool in the eyes of his subordinates. But his dullness and lack of imagination are the foundation of that magnificent tenacity which makes him unconquerable, a hero unawares. He is, miraculously, the immovable object withstanding the irresistible force. By temperament remote from his fellows and foreign to them; yet in his way as representative as Hamlet (though in a different sense) of something universal in Man. This universality and this foreignness are distinguishing features of Conrad's men and women. They are universal in the sense that Conrad's drawing of them is 'true' to certain general and basic experiences of humanity. They are 'foreign' in the sense that he does not see them as they appear to be in the eyes of

¹ See his *Notes on Life and Letters* (1921).

matter-of-fact neighbours, but through the diffusion lens of his own temperament.

To speak thus of the foreignness and the universality of Conrad's people is to express in another metaphor what is meant by those who refer to his 'romantic realism'. He was a realist because his creative genius, stabilized by experience, sought some central actuality as the starting-point for all his stories. He did not invent plots. He was almost incapable of such invention. His material was reality, subjected to the transmuting processes of a lively imagination. Seeds of fact, planted in his mind, germinated (sometimes through long periods) under the light of his imaginative temperament, until there grew the completed 'romantic-realistic' novel or tale. The change which facts underwent in transmission through Conrad's mind is evident. Describing how he first saw the original of Almayer, the chief character in his first novel, Conrad wrote:

He was moving across a patch of burnt grass, a blurred shadowy shape with the blurred bulk of a house behind him.¹

He wrote of another character:

Nina fancied she could distinguish the graceful figure of the trader standing erect in the stern sheets, but in a little while all the outlines got blurred, confused, and disappeared in the folds of white vapour shrouding the middle of the river.²

And again, in a letter concerning the first draft of *The Rescue*:

The idea has the bluish tenuity of dry wood smoke. It is lost in the words as the smoke is lost in the air.³

The 'shadowy shape' of Almayer, the 'blurred' outlines of Dain Maroola the Malayan trader, and the bluish smoky tenuity of *The Rescue*, are equally typical of the romantic

¹ *A Personal Record* (1912).

² *Almayer's Folly*.

³ To Mrs. Bontine, Nov. 22, 1898 (*Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*, by G. Jean Aubry, 1927).

'diffusing' tendency of Conrad's mind. And this softening of outlines, this modulation of the hard, glaring aspect of reality, is the essence of his romantic realism. His actualities and facts become clothed with romantic glamour and adventurous exaltation, more enduring than the excitement of romanticism of the common type because the imaginative treatment of truth is, in the long run, more satisfying than invention. Though the original fact comes to the reader with its outlines diffused, the diffusion does not pass into falsification. Conrad's aesthetic conscientiousness never relaxed after he had once determined his creed. His first two novels, *Almayer's Folly* (1895) and *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), though vivid, powerful and original, are over-painted—the colours heavily laid on, the emotions crudely touched in. But by 1896 Conrad had become a sound self-critic. Writing to Edward Garnett, he says of *The Lagoon* (one of his earliest short stories), 'It's a tricky thing with the usual forests—rivers—stars—wind—sunrise, and so on—and lots of secondhand Conradesc in it.' Yet though in the first two novels there was overmuch colour and insufficient drawing, he was even then capable of that pictorial exactitude which, in so many instances, gives his pages their astonishingly living quality. Much of his work is atmospheric and impressionistic, but he often paints in detail with as much care as the seventeenth-century Dutch painters used; and without distracting attention from his whole design. An example of this detail-painting is the description of Mrs. Willems as she is seen by her husband:

She trailed through a life in that red dressing-gown, with its row of dirty blue bows down the front, stained and hooked on awry; a torn flounce at the bottom following her like a snake as she moved languidly about, with her hair negligently caught up, and a tangled wisp straggling untidily down her back. His gaze travelled upwards from bow to bow, noticing those that hung only by a thread, but it did not go beyond her chin. He looked at her lean throat, at the obtrusive collar-bone visible

in the disarray of the upper part of her attire. He saw the thin arm and the bony hand clasping the child she carried.¹

Whether he was describing splendour or squalor, Conrad's artistic integrity was unsleeping; the artist's delight in the process of creation governed all his work. Verloc's dismal shop, Mrs. Willems's disordered bedroom, glories of sunrise and sunset, the bowed form of a grief-stricken woman; upon these—as upon all his subjects, all his people, and all the incidentals of his books—he expended 'unremitting, never-discouraged care'. That last phrase comes from Conrad's original introduction to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897) (his 'beloved *Nigger*', he called it), an introduction that was, in fact, a declaration of method. Conrad regarded novel-writing as a definite art—'like painting, like music'—and not only as a matter of story-telling. The 'story' element was secondary in his mind. He was aware of the paucity of events in his books, and remarked: 'As to lack of incident—well, it's life.' He maintained that the task of the worker in prose was not, primarily, to edify, console, amuse, improve, encourage, frighten, shock, or charm, but 'by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel . . . before all, to make you *see*'. The novelist has to strive for the perfect blending of form and substance, aspiring 'to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music', which Conrad believed might 'be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words; of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless use'.

To make his novels true works of art was, then, at least half of Conrad's desire; the other half was addressed to the philosophical (almost mystical) purpose of awakening 'that feeling of unavoidable solidarity . . . which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world'. That unifying purpose is central in Conrad's writings, and

¹ *An Outcast of the Islands*: Part I, ch. 3.

he stressed again and again the need for fidelity in human relationships. 'Those who read me,' he said, 'know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas; so simple that they must be as old as the hills. It rests notably, amongst others, on the idea of Fidelity.'¹ Nothing stirred his admiration so profoundly as the keeping of faith between man and man. Who injured another (or, even, refrained from succouring another) was, in the terms of Conrad's philosophy, betraying the whole human brotherhood. The onus of judgment, of determining whether or not a fellow-creature is worthy of succour, does not rest upon us, Conrad would have said. Razumov, in *Under Western Eyes* (1911), betrays Haldin. Haldin is an assassin, and therefore (presumably) a fit subject to be handed over to justice. But under the law that governed Conrad's ideal universe the paramount fact was, in this case, that Razumov was a betrayer. His mentality is sympathetically explored with that power of intimate and subtle probing which gives to Conrad's books their intense psychological interest; but though Razumov may engage the reader's sense of pity and, possibly, arouse some degree of affectionate regard, he is a breaker of the solidarity of the human race, and, as such, must suffer as Haldin suffered before him. In *The Secret Sharer*,² a fugitive from justice is given refuge on the high seas by the narrator of the story, a ship's captain. The narrator acts instinctively upon the principle of Fidelity. He does not question whether the refugee is 'worthy'. He feels immediately that here is a fellow-creature bound inseparably to himself, and therefore to be protected from the Thing in pursuit—namely, man-made Justice. In this story, Conrad's idea of Fidelity is powerfully indicated, not by statement but in action. The captain's sense of solidarity between himself and the 'sharer' is so acute that the two personalities become, in a curious way, almost unified. In his soliloquies

¹ *A Personal Record*: Preface.

² One of three stories in *'Twixt Land and Sea* (1912).

the captain emphasizes his sense of the identity between himself and the other, speaking of him as 'my double', 'my second self', 'part of me'; he experiences a sensation 'of being in two places at once', 'as though I had been faced by my own reflection in the depths of a sombre and immense mirror'.

The same sense of Fidelity draws Captain Anthony to Flora de Barral (*Chance*, 1913) and Heyst to Lena (*Victory*, 1915); it dominates (consciously or otherwise) a score of characters whose creed is to keep faith. For these Conrad had an undying regard; his contempt was reserved for such as Donkin (in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*), the creature who 'knows nothing of courage, of endurance, of the unexpressed faith, of the unspoken loyalty that knits together a ship's company. The independent offspring of the ignoble freedom of the slums, full of disdain and hate for the austere servitude of the sea.'

No mere accident of personal contact determined that the sea should occupy so important a place in Conrad's books. The sea and its 'austere servitude', its 'unconcerned immensity', the 'sleeping and terrible sea', the 'brotherhood of the sea', makes deeper demands upon fidelity than are made by life ashore, where men are more loosely knit together or (it may be) altogether divided by indifference and diversity of interests. At sea, on the contrary, the solidarity of mankind is a primary condition for maintaining an unbroken front against the common enemy, the ocean. Conrad loved ships. He did not love the sea, though he was fascinated by it: 'Impenetrable and heartless, the sea has given nothing of itself to the suitors for its precarious favours . . . for all its fascination that has lured so many to a violent death.'¹

The question arises: Why the child Conrad, born in the heart of a coastless country, became possessed by a

¹ *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906): Section XXXV, which (with the preceding and following sections) should be carefully considered as a succinct statement of Conrad's attitude towards ships and the sea.

passion for the sea, which (as he was afterwards to say) had 'never been friendly to man'?

Much of Joseph Conrad's life-story can be compiled in outline from his books, but as he was incapable of writing in the 'I-was-born' style, neither *A Personal Record* nor *The Mirror of the Sea* is straightforwardly autobiographical. They are autobiography by lightning flashes.

His mother's family were Polish landowners named Bobrowski;¹ his father, Apollo Korzeniowski, was a temperamental member of an impoverished Lithuanian family. Teodor Josef Konrad Korzeniowski² (born in the Ukraine, South Poland, 1857) had early memories of exile in company with his parents. Their house was a meeting-place for Polish insurrectionists, and when Russian officials discovered an impending plot, the father and his wife and child were banished to Vologda in Northern Russia. In consequence of hardships endured in exile, the mother died while Josef was still very young. The circumstances of his early days made him a lonely and brooding child without friends of his own age. He was driven in upon himself, and upon books 'which described countries where it was possible to breathe and act freely, to fight openly, if necessary, and to speak thoughts above a whisper'. When the father, in ill-health, was released from exile as being no longer dangerous, he and the boy settled (1869) at Cracow, where Josef attended a preparatory school.³ As a youth labouring under many repressions, he began to 'desire to escape, cost what it might, into a freer world'. The fullest promise of freedom seemed to the boy to lie in a seafaring life, and especially in the life of a sailor in the British Merchant Service. This was the desire distinctly formulated in his mind (and maintained against the desperate opposition of his relatives): to become a sailor on an English vessel.

¹ Cf. the allusions to Mr. Nicholas B. in *A Personal Record*.

² He took the name Joseph Conrad when naturalized in England in 1884.

³ For reminiscences of his schooldays, see Conrad's *Notes on Life and Letters* (1921), ch. IV, *Poland Revisited*.

Conrad's first sight of the sea was at Venice when he was sixteen, and in the next year (1874) he started for Marseilles, where he shipped as a member of the crew of a French vessel. In the intervals between voyages to the West Indies he spent some time in Marseilles, an important period of his life that remains obscure. Among his intimate friends was Dominique Cervoni, a middle-aged Corsican seaman, who afterwards appeared, in one guise or another, in several of Conrad's books. Cervoni was the original for Nostromo, and for Captain Lingard (in *An Outcast of the Islands*, and *The Rescue*, 1920); and he appears under his own name in *The Mirror of the Sea* and *The Arrow of Gold* (1919). The last-named novel is largely autobiographical. Conrad was implicated in the Carlist conspiracy described therein, 'while in the character of Rita he drew the woman who first taught him to feel passionately'.¹ Conrad left Marseilles in April, 1878, after recovering from a wound received in the duel with which his love-affair ended. His first landing in England was at Lowestoft on June 18, 1878, when he was twenty years old and knew only a few words of English. Six years later he obtained his Board of Trade certificate as a master in the British Merchant Service, after voyages to Australia and the East, which were to provide part of the central facts around which he afterwards built *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and *Youth* (1902). The story of his first command is told in *The Shadow Line* (1927); while later experiences in Congo are outlined in *Heart of Darkness*.² Though at the time he had no intention of leaving the sea, what proved to be his last voyage ended on January 14, 1894, after nearly twenty years of sea life, chiefly on sailing vessels. In 1895, his first novel (*Almayer's Folly*) was published. If at first his manner of writing betrayed a foreigner, within a few years he was a master of English prose style. Yet his fame grew slowly, and when he died (August 1924) he had experienced only a few years

¹ G. Jean Aubry: *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*.

² Included in *Youth*.

of moderate popularity, though other writers recognized his mastery years before the public 'discovered' him on the appearance of *Chance*, one of his more difficult novels.

Conrad's usual deliberate method of indirect narration is a cause of stumbling to some readers, who find him tiresome because (they say) 'he does not get on with the story'. This complaint is not unreasonable, though it is not true of more than half his books. It will be enough to suggest, here, that when he does not 'get on with the story', it is because he had what he considered a more important task in hand: namely, to give, as far as possible, a clear revelation of the truth underlying the particular human problem engaging his attention. And so, in *Lord Jim* (1900) and elsewhere, he introduces Marlow as a receiver and sifter of evidence collected from several sources. Just as Browning, in *The Ring and the Book*, tells Pompilia's story again and again from different points of view, so Conrad introduces a number of characters for the purpose of considering the problem from their differing angles. Though the progress of the narrative may be slow, the final gain is considerable, unless novels are to be regarded only as a form of light entertainment. At the close of *Lord Jim* a patient reader feels that many dark places in human personality have been explored and lighted up in a way that makes Jim's 'acute consciousness of lost honour' tremendously impressive. Jim deserted his ship; thereby violating 'the solidarity of the craft' and offending against the immitigable law of Fidelity—an offence for which expiation had to be made. At the time of his desertion of an apparently sinking vessel he was young and untried; in essence a man of honour, but with a fatal tendency towards momentary panic. For the rest of his life he had the relentless ghost of lost honour ever pursuing him, and nothing could appease that spectre except the vow, 'I shall be faithful . . . I shall be faithful', which brought him, after a dishonoured life, to a brave and honourable death. Jim is an important figure in the Conrad universe since he is in himself so attractive and lovable that the temptation to

make him more 'sympathetic' than tragic must have been difficult to resist. But Conrad's moral integrity and artistic sincerity were always proof against the bribe of sentiment.

The high general level of Conrad's novels is remarkable. He wrote nothing that could without loss be dropped from the canon of his work, and he is one of the very few novelists of the century whose achievement does not appear smaller as time passes.

§ 5. *Tradition and Experiment*

For nearly a century and a half—from Fielding to the last of the great Victorians—the English novel swept along on a tide of creative energy which reached full power in Dickens's careless vitality and exuberance. Dickens neglected form and style because his desire for utterance was so urgent. Later novelists, George Meredith and Henry James among them, had less to say and could afford time to say it more carefully; and when creative energy became still less abundant, after 1914, disproportionate attention began to be given to theories of fiction.

But other phases of the twentieth-century novel intervened.

Round about 1910-12, when Wells, Bennett, Galsworthy and Conrad were maintaining the prestige of the traditional type of English novel, a group of younger writers began to produce able and promising work. After writing a warmly praised eighteenth-century story, *The Passionate Elopement* (1911), Compton Mackenzie turned to studies of modern young people. *Carnival* (1912), a novel of theatrical life, was followed by the two volumes of *Sinister Street* (1913, 1914), which set a fashion for long and detailed books dealing with childhood, adolescence, and undergraduate experience. This Oxford novel came to be regarded for a time almost as a charter of emancipated youth, and it holds a place among the fiction of that period because it expresses so well the sensations of being young in the years immediately

before the war of 1914-18, the springtime of Rupert Brooke and his contemporaries. Though Compton Mackenzie did not shirk ugliness, his prose style coloured the tale with a hazy golden light. In *Guy and Pauline* (1915) he wrote an idyllic love story, full of warmth and sunshine. By that time the war-storm had burst, and the young novelists soon seemed much less important than they had done two years earlier. The war ended and a number of these writers survived, but their reputations never fully recovered. Compton Mackenzie retained a wide popularity, and produced a succession of readable novels, as well as several volumes of memories of his wartime experiences as an intelligence officer in the Aegean zone: but the post-war *intelligentsia* gave little attention to him.

J. D. Beresford and Frank Swinnerton became established novelists after 1918, though none of their later works attracted as much critical attention as had been given to the former's *The House in Demetrius Road* (1914) and Swinnerton's excellent little novel of the experiences of a few hours in the life of a group of Londoners, *Nocturne* (1917). Frank Swinnerton was afterwards to write one of the best surveys of the writers of his generation, *The Georgian Literary Scene* (1935), and a notable autobiography, *Swinnerton* (1937). Of all the novelists regarded as promising young men round about 1912, Hugh Walpole achieved the most solid success (he was knighted in 1937). As he matured, his competence as a producer of fiction was put monumentally beyond doubt. *The Herries Chronicle* (one-volume edition 1939), composed of four previously published long novels—*Rogue Herries*, *Judith Paris*, *The Fortress*, *Vanessa*—deals with experiences of members of the Herries family from the eighteenth century down to modern times. Its beginning as a robust narrative of the historical type set in the Lake District gives a considerable impetus to the story at the outset, but hardly sufficient to sustain the book through its enormous length. The reissue of Galsworthy's Forsyte novels and short stories in a single volume in 1922 set a

fashion in long books, a fashion which appeared to be followed by some writers for no other reason than that it was a fashion. The length of an imaginative work is pre-determined by aesthetic necessity, and an otherwise excellent book will be spoiled by being either artificially spun out or arbitrarily abbreviated. The relative smallness (beside *The Herries Chronicle*) of Hugh Walpole's *Mr. Perrin and Mr. Traill* (1911) does not prevent its being a more significant and impressive achievement—one of the author's best books—dating from days before he became a figure in the contemporary social scene and before he was spoken of, with little discretion, in the same breath as Trollope and Scott. Yet, except for a few stories with a sadistic trend, Walpole as a novelist kept to the traditional path, though the break-up of smooth tradition, and dissatisfaction with competence alone in fiction, had threatened, in the second half of D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, as early as 1913.

Tradition—and competence—were, however, far from exhausted. Francis Brett Young, a beginner about 1914, served as a medical officer attached to the Rhodesia regiment campaigning in East Africa during 1914–18 and that experience produced an account of his doings, *Marching on Tanga* (1917), and provided the setting for a very good novel of character, atmosphere and adventure, *The Crescent Moon* (1918). As that novel indirectly suggested, Brett Young's native place was Worcestershire, the locality he chose for several novels. *Portrait of Clare* (1927) and *My Brother Jonathan* (1928) are representative examples of the solid and honest English novels of his second period; but there followed the more immediately attractive books in which the history of modern South Africa is assimilated to the purposes of fiction, successfully blending story and fact: *They Seek a Country* (1937), *The City of Gold* (1939).

In the early years of the century, writers of historical novels were still mainly concerned with the sword-and-cloak

and fancy costume type of narrative (see the work of Stanley Weyman, Henry Seton Merriman, Maurice Hewlett, and Marjorie Bowen; the last-named also wrote as 'George Preedy'), but different standards were set by Naomi Mitchison and Robert Graves. Both dealt with remote times—the former with Greeks and Barbarians, the latter with Roman times in *I Claudius* and *Claudius the God*. Using a documentary convention and avoiding 'literary' airs and graces, Robert Graves produced two of the most original books of his generation. Claudius, physically hideous, is made to tell his own story, with very subtle effect, against the background of splendour and horror, of majesty and misery and murder, in imperial Rome. The sustained greyness of much of *I Claudius* (1934) increases the vividness of the lurid passages, which are charged with a mounting terror, up to the last fantastic scene where Claudius, after the murder of Caligula, is thrust into the imperial seat by the soldiery. Naomi Mitchison, also, mitigates nothing of the cruelty of the ancients. She is an admirable story-teller, and tried the interesting experiment of making her characters talk in a modern colloquial style, even introducing modern slang. This radical departure from the nineteenth-century practice of attempting to suggest period-atmosphere by the use of archaisms induced in the reader a direct feeling of intimacy with the past, which thus was made to seem close and real instead of unreal and distant. A growing concern with political affairs of her day tended to draw Naomi Mitchison away from her earlier interests. Among her outstanding books are *The Conquered* (1923), *Cloud Cuckoo Land* (1925), and *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931).

By the nineteen-thirties, after having for many years been more or less ignored by the intellectuals, Somerset Maugham had taken a high place among his contemporaries, both as a dramatist and as a writer of fiction. In his case, popular favour preceded critical acclaim, and his satirical mind must have experienced considerable wry

satisfaction from the spectacle of the experts belatedly hurrying to catch up with independent public approval. Somerset Maugham has told of his transition from medicine to literature in *The Summing-Up* (1938) which is less an autobiography than a statement of his purposes as a writer, and a recital of his mental and moral attitude. His early novel *Liza of Lambeth* (1897) belongs to the period when tales of Cockney life were in fashion, and Maugham's obstetrical experiences among the poor of South London brought him into close touch with the human material he treated understandingly in that book. For some years after, narrative fiction sank to be of only minor interest to him, while he was becoming a celebrity in the theatre. In 1916, however, he published an excellent long novel, *Of Human Bondage*, some part of which is recollective of phases of his own life. This is a fine achievement, but work of a more distinctively personal kind was to come. *Cakes and Ale* (1930) has incisiveness, brilliance, genuine pathos and beauty. It is his best novel, for, here, wit and satire do not drive out human sympathy and understanding. Novels about novelists are usually meat chiefly for the literary, but this story of Driffield—whose attraction to common things and common people in bar parlours and the like makes him faintly derisive of his own fame as an author—appeals to a much larger class of readers. The character of Rosie, the barmaid who becomes Driffield's first wife, is Somerset Maugham's masterpiece and one of the great characters in English fiction. In *Cakes and Ale* the main characteristic of the mature Maugham—absence of romantic illusion—is less productive of what often seems in his short stories to be a cynically sterile view of life. Rosie is warm and abundant, the generous-breasted ministrant. The author laughs and feels with her; he is not aloof or contemptuously amused, and she is safe from the cracking and cutting lash of his wit. In the illuminating preface to his collected short stories, *Altogether* (1934), Somerset Maugham acknowledges his debt to Maupassant, though he has himself contributed

far more to them than he borrowed from the Frenchman. The short stories are very often dazzling, though occasionally only glittering. The impish audacity of his wit and his disrespect for self-righteousness are breathtaking in *The Vessel of Wrath*, the perfect story of its kind.¹ The tragic note is not outside his range (see *Red*), but his celebrated story, *Rain*—of a prostitute, Sadie Thompson, converted by a missionary who then succumbs to lust, solicits her, and commits suicide—misses tragedy and achieves only a painful sordidness. Tragedy is, indeed, a will-o'-the-wisp to Somerset Maugham. It led, in the novel, *A Christmas Holiday* (1939), to his one major failure. The theme of the book required a master of high tragedy. Dostoevsky could have handled it, but Somerset Maugham failed to lift it from dullness and gloom.

Following a limited success with *The White Peacock* (1911) and *The Trespasser*, 1912, D. H. Lawrence stepped into the front rank of contemporary novelists when *Sons and Lovers* appeared in 1913. The earlier part of that book is largely a circumstantial record of the author's own early environment and experience, and indicates the source of the emotional fixation between himself and his mother which was subsequently to make him a man divided against himself and unable to yield to any fully integrated love relationship. Almost to the end of his life (1885-1930) Lawrence regarded a woman in love as a harpy set on tearing asunder the man she loves, destroying his personality, and absorbing his being into her own. Lawrence's men, therefore, display a Laurentian tendency to be the bitter enemies as well as the lovers of their wives and mistresses. This sexual warfare is, in a limited degree, a part of common experience, but D. H. Lawrence enlarged it to the measure of the whole, and enwrapped with it a quasi-mystical system of frustrate passions employing its own turgid terminology—'mystic suave loins of darkness, dark-

¹ See the chapter on Dramatists for comments on Somerset Maugham's plays.

clad and suave', 'the immemorial magnificence of mystic, palpable, real otherness'¹—phrases which, taken alone, appear incredible, but which are yet a part of the very texture of Lawrence's books and served to prejudice a vast number of readers against them.

After his death too many of his disciples wrote about him in a manner that was seldom illuminating and often misleading, before Aldous Huxley's long introduction to *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence* (1932) and the letters themselves portrayed him more accurately.

His main and persistent purpose—to revolutionize the modern attitude towards sex—became stronger towards the end, and in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) he threw off such restraints of convention as had hitherto kept that purpose in leash. He wished to rid mankind of the shame complex which causes many men and women to associate sex activity with indecency: 'I want men and women,' he wrote,² 'to be able to think sex, fully, completely, honestly and cleanly.' He wanted sex to be the source through which comes the pure central fire of life. He deplored the dualism of the modern habit—the setting up of dividing barriers between mind and body, between brain and blood—and protested against the grey puritanism which desires to make the body prisoner of the mind: 'I have always inferred that sex meant blood-sympathy and blood-contact. Technically this is so. But as a matter of fact, nearly all modern sex is a pure matter of nerves, cold and bloodless.'³

Discussion of the stylistic quality of Lawrence's writing is far from easy, since he detested every appearance of professionalism and, as a writer, endeavoured to retain the mark of the amateur. 'He despised fine writing even where it would best suit his purpose',⁴ and preferred a crudely dynamic style. Yet almost in spite of himself a good deal of his prose has beauty. He said somewhere that 'if you

¹ *Women in Love* (1921).

² *Apropos of Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Bonamy Dobree: *The Lamp and the Lute* (1929).

write about anything you should write about it *hot*', and much that he wrote is furious with a convulsive energy and fire, though his debating style sometimes veered towards the peevish shrillness of intellectual immaturity. But mostly he was a good hater, hating principally the lust for money and the 'modern' way of loving, which seemed to him to bring the splendid freedoms of the body into bondage to the mind. He was not an advocate of animalism, he did not (as was alleged) idealize 'the morals of the farmyard'; his aim was to return to the primal energy of Eden, before the human consciousness became besmirched by the sense of sin, and before man became womanized.

Reference has already been made to the repeated statement in Lawrence's books of the conflict between Man and Woman, a conflict he believed to arise from civilized woman's having become the desperate antagonist of man, drawing from him his greatest possession—his manhood, his masculinity—and in time feminizing him and bringing him under the control of her will. In *Aaron's Rod* he makes one of the characters say, speaking of woman in general:

I hate her, when she knows, and when she *wills*. I hate her when she will make of me that which serves her desire. She may love me, she may be soft and kind to me, she may give her life to me. But why? Only because I am *hers*.

And again:

Women are the very hottest hell once they get the start of you. There's *nothing* they won't do to you, once they've got you. Nothing they won't do to you. Especially if they love you.

There is much more of this anti-feminine frenzy in *Aaron's Rod* and other of Lawrence's books. Yet there is at the heart of it a terrible clear-sightedness—a revelation of the closeness of love and hate, of creation and destruction. Lawrence

was especially interested in birds and beasts, with whom creation and death are sometimes almost simultaneous. Birth—love—the new creation—death. It was in this sequence that Lawrence saw the universe moving. Of this sequence, he seemed to feel, man is the victim. All things moving towards creation and re-creation; and, amid this process, is man the instrument of creation—to be devitalized when he has served his immediate end.

D. H. Lawrence was a genius though a lop-sided genius—over-sensitive to attack, and so tormented by the necessity of rousing men and women to a full consciousness of the *serious* importance of creative energy expressed through sex, that he under-estimated the love-value of playful and pure delight. He was a neo-Puritan currently mislabelled a libertine; *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, a sexual purgative, was received as pornography; his ultimate masterpiece, *The Man Who Died* (1930), was little noticed. But that lovely last-named fable is a perfect thing, a final reconciliation of the elements that had warred within him, a discovery of atonement on the threshold of death, a vision of apocalyptic harmony between Osiris and Christ.

The sexual theme upon which Lawrence dogmatized for long with religious fervour and disproportion, obsessed his generation until, as happens with obsessions, it became a source of boredom and/or disgust even to those it had fascinated. For the sated amorist all the springs of life are dried up. He may take refuge, as Tolstoy did, in an exacting asceticism which forbids to others a reasonable enjoyment of the delights he has himself exhausted through excess; or he may fail to find any means of personal salvation and wither to extinction through a time of unmitigated and more or less prolonged barrenness. The spectacle of a society withering in a desert of make-believe and joyless gaiety, served numerous novelists and dramatists in the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties with material they

turned to gruesome use. The most prominent of this group was Aldous Huxley, grandson of the eminent Victorian, Thomas Henry Huxley. As a writer of fiction (he wrote, also, essays, travel-books, a play, and some verse) he had the useful gift of being (at least in his earlier works) irresistibly readable. He was well equipped as a humorist and wit, mainly sardonic and often so savage as to lead to his being regarded as a modern Swift. The inclination to consider him also as a follower of D. H. Lawrence had little foundation, for Huxley wrote, not, as Lawrence did, with the fervour of the blood, but in the deadly chill of a cerebral contempt which distilled vitriol. The contemporary Dance of Death had for him its moments of ludicrous humour, recorded in such of his books as *Crome Yellow* (1921), *Mortal Coils* (1922), and the more acerb *Antic Hay* (1923) in which the human being becomes something of a Gothic grotesque. As the political atmosphere grew more and more saturated with intolerance and hatred, Aldous Huxley's novels became more darkly charged with antagonism towards these tendencies. *Point Counter Point* (1928) is corrosive with detestations, so generously distributed as to leave few of us unscathed. *Brave New World* (1932) pictured horribly a possible future in which laboratory-produced creatures would be mechanistically conditioned to serve the will of their masters in a world where every one performs the motions of life without, in any acceptable sense, living. The measure in which this 'brave new world' was already existing for the radio and newspaper and otherwise capitalistically-conditioned masses, gave Aldous Huxley's vision a more immediately sobering significance than any mere story of an inverted Utopia could have had. But as he became more immersed in the fearful contemplation of a threatening cosmic catastrophe, Huxley sacrificed a good deal of his readability, as was markedly apparent in *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936), though some of his original verve was recovered in *After Many a Summer*.

The argument between traditionalists and experimentalists in the modern novel is to some extent an argument about Time. Traditionalists keep their eyes upon the calendar and the clock: hours pass, the years go on—and proportion is kept between time and action.¹ Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, and other modernists set themselves to annihilate the time-factor. They do not accept as a fixed formula that the morning and the evening are one day; evening or morning—or any part of either—may represent eternity or (on the other hand) less than a single pulse-beat. Time, they imply, has no positive quality: its value and duration are relative to other fluctuating factors; one person's whole life-story may have no greater time-value than twenty-four hours in the life of another. This attempt to destroy the tyranny of Time in fiction has brought other changes. Old forms and old idioms sufficed for novelists who accepted the time-convention and the correlative conventions of plot, action, and character used in orthodox novels. But since action *qua* action is usually sharply outlined and fixed in Time, action is almost eliminated from the novels of Dorothy Richardson and James Joyce; thought *qua* thought is also eschewed, as being susceptible of a certain fixity. Action and thought abandoned, consciousness remains—without beginning and without end—able to effect infinite reduction of Time and infinite extension also. In the sequence of novels about Miriam Henderson written by Dorothy Richardson, and in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), plot, action, character and thought are merged and lost in the 'stream of consciousness', down which drifts endlessly a mass of mental flotsam and jetsam without cohesion. *Ulysses* is a phantasmagoria. The 'stream of consciousness'

¹ 'Traditional' novelists, of course, have sometimes ignored the time-factor. Conrad is challenged by traditionalist critics because Marlow's narratives could seldom have been spoken within the time assigned. And Samuel Richardson's Pamela could have had little time for domestic duties in the intervals between her letters.

running through it receives sewage without disguise, since sewage is not to be ignored except by the repressive influences working in the conscious mind. In the subconscious, moral (or other) censorship is inoperative; distinctions between phantasy and fact, between 'the decent' and 'the indecent' are not made. It is quite irrelevant, therefore, to dwell upon or even to refer to 'indecencies' in parts of *Ulysses*; to do so is as unprofitable as to feel shocked by 'indecent' dreams. *Ulysses*, like the later *Finnegan's Wake* (which as *Work in Progress* took seventeen years to bring to birth) is a repository of the author's rare erudition and linguistic attainments. It is impossible to discuss either book here, since both have esoteric significances comprehensible only to the initiated. *Finnegan's Wake* is written throughout in a virtually new language, much of which is unintelligible to the average mind. Distorted sound-echoes of sense-making phrases can be caught from time to time, while the whole may perhaps be better considered as a kind of musical notation for the communication of profundities incommunicable in standard language. In these later works of James Joyce, so it is declared by his disciples, all knowledge is synthesized. The majority of readers will turn with relief, however, to his earlier books written in normal language (e.g. *Dubliners* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*). It must be noted here that Joyce is regarded by some—including other writers—as the great genius of his time and the paramount literary force.

Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and others, appear to give insufficient weight to the consideration that the time-factor is governed by the *varying intensity* of human experience. The nearly seven hundred large pages of *Ulysses* cover only one day in the lives of three people, whose sensations are flattened out, like a desert unbroken by any sandhill or oasis. So also, Dorothy Richardson's books amble onward, as Miriam goes through a life which has few emotional contours.

Many pages might be filled by mentioning the names, only, of other authors who, between 1901 and 1940, wrote distinctive novels. One of the most interesting is E. M. Forster. The thin, dry atmosphere in Forster's books is bracing, yet too rarefied for the characters to live healthy and fully physical lives; they are sometimes so overstrung, emotionally and intellectually, that their crises appear to be rooted in hysteria. Miss Quested's charge against Dr. Aziz¹ is a tragic consequence of hysteria; Lucy Honeychurch's reaction to George Emerson's kiss,² a semi-comedy of hysteria. E. M. Forster's style is luminous and sensitive, and his books have many beautiful passages; his satire is sharp and penetrating as he deals with conventions and incidentals; and there is profound (sometimes bitter) irony in the poisoning of massive effects upon tiny causes, like a monstrous inverted pyramid. Nevertheless, when admiration has been fully expressed, the feeling returns that the characters are caged in the author's mind, unable to escape into actuality. There is in the manner of his novels, too, a quality that falls just short of austerity by being a trifle over-close to frigidity. This chill is less apparent in his essays on a variety of subjects in *Abinger Harvest* (1936), a companionable and often a wise book.

George Moore (1853-1933), though belonging to the older generation, takes a place among the experimenters. Born in Ireland, he went to Paris in the 'seventies to study painting, but realizing that he could make no headway in graphic art he turned to literature. After essaying verse in the manner of Baudelaire, Moore found his way at length to fiction, and three Zolaesque novels were followed in 1894 by *Esther Waters* (a landmark among English realistic novels) written in London. In 1901 he went back to Ireland for several years, producing short stories and a novel of Irish peasant life (*The Untilled Field*, 1903; *The Lake*, 1905), and his superb masterpiece of indiscreet memories, *Hail and Farewell* (1911-14). But Moore's chief claim to remembrance

¹ *A Passage to India* (1924).

² *A Room with a View* (1908).

rests upon *The Brook Kerith* (1916), in which his later phase of unremitting devotion to a prose style distinguished by unornamental clarity and lucidity is carried to perfection in a story of Jesus and Paul among the Essenes. Moore continued his experiments in austere and crystalline English prose until he died, writing and re-writing to the end. His later novels include *Heloïse and Abelard* (1921)—which should be compared with Helen Waddell's *Peter Abelard* (1933)—and *Aphrodite in Aulis* (1930), as well as *A Story-teller's Holiday* (1928), which shows the sensual element that flushed his somewhat spinsterish character.

Many novels arising out of the experiences of soldiers in the war of 1914-18 appeared in 1929 and 1930. Among these Frederick Manning's *Her Privates We*¹ (issued as by 'Private 19022' and first recognized as in Manning's style by T. E. Lawrence—'Lawrence of Arabia') and Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero* were prominent. Manning was a scholar and a stylist already valued by a few for his essays and poems. He died in 1935, unknown still to the wider reading public except (and already half forgotten) as Private 19022. The passionate anger against war in *Death of a Hero* was only palely reflected in the spleen of some later books by Richard Aldington, but he rose to his best again in the splendidly human *All Men are Enemies* (1933). In addition, Aldington is a fine poet and translator.

David Garnett (son of Edward Garnett, who, as publisher's reader, was the guide, comforter, and stimulator of many writers including Joseph Conrad; and grandson of Richard Garnett of the British Museum and author of a book of short stories, *The Twilight of the Gods*, 1888, cherished by literary connoisseurs) became famous overnight with his short fantasy *Lady into Fox* (1922), followed by *A Man in the Zoo* (1924), and two books inspired by aviation, *The Grasshoppers Come* (1931) and *A Rabbit in the Air* (1932).

¹ The original unexpurgated version was issued in a limited edition as *The Middle Parts of Fortune*.

David Garnett also wrote full-length novels of a more usual kind, and edited *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence* (1938). Fantasy has a place in the rural novels of T. F. Powys, brother of J. C. Powys and Llewellyn Powys. T. F. Powys's *Mr. Weston's Good Wine* (1927) is an impressive parable, beautifully written and less repellently coloured than are most of his other books by a Puritan horror of (but detailed dwelling upon) lustful doings among villagers. A happier spirit of fantasy is present in Ronald Fraser's *The Flying Draper* (1924), *Rose Anstey* (1930), and other novels by the same author.

J. B. Priestley's *The Good Companions* (1929) recaptured, in motoring days, the spirit of the English roads which had been destroyed when the railways took the traffic and the life that had meant so much to the novels of Dickens, Fielding, and others. *The Good Companions* is an honest book that deserved its popular success, though the doings of a small concert party are subjected to a great strain in supporting so large a book. Considered technically, *The Good Companions* is a clumsy affair, but so, for the most part, were Dickens's novels; and Priestley's book, like all Dickens's, has gusto, a flair for comic characterization, and a general warmheartedness.

Life on the English canals was delightfully depicted in *The Water Gipsies* (1930) by A. P. Herbert, who in *Holy Deadlock* (1934) turned to satirize the peculiarities of English divorce laws before, having in the meantime become Member of Parliament for Oxford University, he was instrumental in changing them.

Social and industrial conditions engaged the attention of scores of novelists: e.g. A. J. Cronin in *The Stars Look Down* (1935) and *The Citadel* (1938); Louis Golding in *Magnolia Street* (1932), a study of relationships between Jews and Gentiles in a large English provincial town; Walter Greenwood in *Love on the Dole* (1933), a book meriting high praise for its expression of strong sympathy with an unfortunate class of people by one of its own

members, who presents his case in a story that holds the attention and does not defeat itself in partisan hysteria, nor substitute ideological puppets for genuine men and women. A. J. Cronin having caught the public favour in 1931 with a violent novel in which everything is extravagantly more than life-size, *Hatter's Castle*, abandoned medicine for literature and proceeded to acquire a more sober style. *The Citadel* cunningly combined sentiment, glimpses of working-class conditions in the Welsh mining areas, the struggles of a general practitioner, the dejections of a research worker bothered by bureaucrats, and the financial jugglings and professional inadequacy of West End specialists, one of whom sees the light and pits himself against the General Medical Council. It is an example of the modern type of fairy tale that disguises itself as a realistic novel.

The eminence of John Masefield and Walter de la Mare as poets drew attention away from their achievements as writers of fiction. The former's early novel, set mainly in tropical Africa, *Multitude and Solitude* (1909), was too soon forgotten; while there is much attractive and vigorous narrative writing and adventure in *Odtaa* (1926), *Dead Ned* (1938) and *Alive and Kicking Ned* (1939). De la Mare's *Memoirs of a Midget* (1921) and his several volumes of short stories have the same elusive grace and strangeness as his poems. Charles Williams, another poet turned novelist, was the inventor of 'the metaphysical thriller', a kind of novel combining various strains—religion, philosophy, poetry, and mystery. *War in Heaven* (1930) was the first of these; *The Place of the Lion* (1931) perhaps the best. They require an instructed, even an initiated, audience, for Charles Williams plays with myths and legends, ideas and images, with an ease and familiarity that few can equal. But they have an original force, and their author is entitled to rebut the charge of obscurity by claiming that only the mentally immature find them obscure.

L. H. Myers' *The Root and the Flower* (1935; incorporating

The Near and the Far, 1929; *Prince Jali*, 1931; and *Rajah Amar*) is an exquisitely written meditative novel in an Indian setting and dated in the time of Akbar, but it is outside time and place and is one of the major productions of the period. Though wider attention has been given to Charles Morgan than to L. H. Myers, the latter is a finer artist and a more profound thinker. Charles Morgan's *The Fountain* (1932) flattered its admirers' intelligence by appearing to make philosophical ideas easy to comprehend. But the well-bred immaculate manner of Charles Morgan's writings may be a deceptive piece of literary tailoring, a perfect Savile Row suit encasing a simulacrum. Though the satisfactions of perfect tailoring are not to be underestimated, a novel, like a suit, needs a body with guts. In Charles Morgan's works there is, too, an oddly persistent mood of frustration, as though the characters lack the courage to come to terms with life on the basis of its own robust actualities, and shrink into a state of mental, moral, and spiritual elegant invalidism that leads to the death complex of *Sparkenbroke* (1936).

At the opposite extreme stands James Hanley, with a predilection for violence in style and matter, but thoroughly genuine in his toughness and no member of what Arnot Robertson has called 'the false-hair-on-the-chest school'. Hanley's *Captain Bottell* (1933) is not dwarfed by comparison with Conrad and Hermann Melville.

Claude Houghton, though an always interesting writer, is apt to impose too great a strain upon his own ingenuity, as he does in *I am Jonathan Scrivener* (1930). *Chaos is Come Again* (1932) is a less unusual but more satisfactory novel, in which wit, humour, meditation, social criticism, and a sense of character are effectively combined.

Eric Linklater had the well-compensated misfortune to write in *Juan in America* (1931) so popular and extremely amusing a book that a multitude of readers thereafter expected him to produce others in the same genre. *Juan in China* (1937) did not satisfy those expectations, but among

his earlier novels the very different *White Maa's Saga* (1929) should be noted.

C. S. Forester may well come to be ranked with the foremost novelists of the century. Though military and naval subjects have a special attraction for him he universalizes them, and even a pacifist should feel his blood fired by the epic courage and tenacity of an obscure sailor in *Brown on Resolution* (1929)—a deceptively simple but tremendous piece of work. All Forester's writing is of an exceptionally high standard, and his fascinating stories embody a good deal of bland irony and subtle observation of character.

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The cult of misery with its morbidly sentimental preoccupation with the under-dog took a firm hold of the English short story in the nineteen-thirties. The several volumes of *Penguin Parade* and *The Faber Book of Short Stories* (the latter edited by Elizabeth Bowen) are illustrative of this mode. A. E. Coppard, H. E. Bates, and Malachi Whitaker stand out from among the short-story writers of the 'thirties, though Coppard had established himself thoroughly in the preceding decade, when Katherine Mansfield's work and his own brought in a loosely-articulated and delicately-sensitive type of story which challenged and largely superseded the story with a definite plot, such as Kipling and H. G. Wells had popularized in the eighteen-nineties and nineteen-hundreds. Somerset Maugham, however, continued to excel in the older mode long after it had, nominally, gone out of fashion.

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§ 6. *Women Novelists*

Women had already written many fine novels in the early years of the twentieth century, and as masculine force and creative energy died down among men writers women seemed to take over those qualities. Elizabeth Robins,

who began to publish in the 'nineties, continued to produce novels marked by a combination of feminine insight and masculine vigour. In *The Magnetic North* (1904), one of several books in which she dealt with the Arctic region, she displays an astounding knowledge of men's minds. Whether for incident, atmosphere, or psychology, *The Magnetic North* is a very remarkable novel.

May Sinclair, a restless genius, did not settle to any one type or style. Her sixth book, *The Divine Fire* (1904), is a long and detailed study of a poetic genius, in which character and discussion are of equal interest. The difficulty of creating a literary genius in a fictional work is evident, and perhaps May Sinclair never succeeds in making Savage Keith Rickman the Keats-like person he seems intended to be. Though he talks perfect Greek he is tortured by an imperfect control of English; he has 'the soul of a young Sophocles battling with that of a junior journalist in the body of a dissipated young Cockney . . . the child of 'Ellas and of 'Olywell Street'. But even if the whole extensive plan is not realized with uniform success, *The Divine Fire* is nevertheless a book of uncommon merit, at times approaching greatness. Both in this novel and in *The Combined Maze* (1913) the author shows much ability in portraying drab and mean lives, with their jumbled pathos, kindliness and folly. This is particularly displayed in chapters dealing with the Bloomsbury boarding-house in which Rickman lives, and in domestic scenes amid 'the paradise of little clerks' in *The Combined Maze*. Subsequently May Sinclair came under the influence of Freud's psycho-analytical theories and of Dorothy Richardson's literary methods. *Mary Olivier* (1919) dabbles with the 'Oedipus complex', spiritual inhibitions, fears of insanity, and thwarted desires. Though always interesting, *Mary Olivier* is rarely free from the desolating sense of 'horrible tension':

'The evening had begun.

They took up their books. Mamma hid her face behind

Anthony Trollope, Mary hers behind Thomas Hardy. Presently she would hear Mamma sigh, then yawn.

Horrible tension.

Under the edge of her book she would see Anthony Trollope lying in Mamma's lap and Mamma's fingers playing with the fringe of her shawl. She would put Thomas Hardy down and take up Anthony Trollope and read aloud till Mamma's head began bowing in a doze. Then she would take up Thomas Hardy. When Mamma waked Hardy would go down under Trollope; when she dozed he would come to the top again.¹

The Life and Death of Harriett Frean (1922) covers about seventy years in 184 pages. Though short, this book produces an impression that is, in its immediate effect, almost as vivid as that given by Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale*. The omission of detail, however, robs *Harriet Frean* of the rich sense of humanity present in Bennett's novel, and little remains in the reader's memory but the impression of an ugly life. Harriett Frean was encouraged from childhood to strive consciously after 'beautiful behaviour', but the deliberate cultivation of 'her own moral beauty' led to a narrow idealism indistinguishable from disastrous selfishness. The book is also marred by passages of excessive realism,² though May Sinclair's tiny realistic touches are deeply significant. What (for instance) could be more illuminating of Time's perpetual irony than the ornamental blue egg? As a child Harriett loved the blue egg; later she grew to hate it, and when her mother died took it from the drawing-room to the spare room. Many years afterwards:

She was back in the drawing-room of her youth. Only one thing was missing. She went upstairs and took the blue egg out of the spare room and set it in its place on the marble-topped table. She sat gazing at it a long time in happy, child-like satisfaction.³

One by one the English counties have been parcelled

¹ Book Four, ch. XXX, § ii.

² e.g., the description of Prissie's paralysis, ch. VI. ³ Ch. XIV.

out among the novelists, and at an early age Sheila Kaye-Smith justified her annexation of Sussex and its marshes. To a casual visitor, the landscape in which this writer sets her stories might appear to be given over almost wholly to the 'rotting sea-mists' of *Joanna Godden* (1921). Yet Sheila Kaye-Smith brought immensity out of flatness, and the passionate masculine strength of her novels lies as much in environment as in character. She has been likened to Hardy, but there is not between Sheila Kaye-Smith and Sussex the symbolic intimacy that links Hardy to Wessex. She is a modern observer of scenes and phenomena; he, an ancient indweller and soothsayer. Sheila Kaye-Smith's characters are more definitely localized (even parochialized) than Hardy's, and readers are at a disadvantage if, being unfamiliar with local terms, they 'don't know a teg from a tup'.¹ Interest is concentrated upon environment and upon what environment makes of character. Thus, in *Sussex Gorse* (1916), the implacable soil on Boarzell hill tries, and tortures, and almost destroys a whole family before it is tamed by the fanatical purpose of Reuben Backfield, who swore to bring it under cultivation. The battle between man and earth goes on without mercy, day after day, year after year, until both are scarred and torn. So titanic is the struggle, that on a first reading the sharp focusing of interest upon the central spectacle obscures secondary impressions. But to re-read *Sussex Gorse* is to be conscious of a strain of cruelty running through the narrative, and leaving a final impression as horrible as that of an Elizabethan tragedy of blood. There is no gleam of light, no sense of compensation; only madness and death and ruin.

Sheila Kaye-Smith's books miss the last touch of distinction because her emotional relentlessness is so overstrained that it approaches inverted sentimentality. She will not allow the afflicted to escape until they taste the dregs of anguish. *Joanna Godden*, in a frenzy after Martin

¹ *Joanna Godden*, Part I, § 12.

Trevor's death, 'expressed her grief in terms of fierce activity . . . because not merely her heart but her whole self was broken, and she was just flying and rattling about like a broken thing'.¹ Reuben Backfield, Edward Monypenny² and the Rev. Mr. Sumption³ are also, like Joanna, frenzied creatures; but their frenzy is not so much a stroke from the high gods, or from the tumult within, as from the author's too ruthless pen.⁴

Those trifling interests of civilized society which escaped notice in Sheila Kaye-Smith's elemental world, are, on the other hand, Rose Macaulay's chief concern. She was an acute social critic in various novels, and her brilliance was almost insolent, for she appeared to turn no more than half an eye upon the world. 'Half an eye is enough,' she seems to say; 'who would need more to detect the palpable follies of this madly comic and tragically delirious world?' In a succession of satirical novels she demolished the follies and pretences of several generations, and her pen faltered for lack of other victims. *Orphan Island* (1924) was little more than a satirical paraphrase of Victorian history—too easy game for her keen and glittering weapons. *Potterism* (1920)—the first of the novels to show fully Rose Macaulay's spirit of lively satire—was dedicated to the 'unsentimental precisians in thought, who have, on this confused, inaccurate, and emotional planet, no fit habitation'. 'Potterism' is a synonym for the discarded term 'philistinism'—the worship of commercial success, 'the booming of the second-rate', the admiration of popular things. Mrs. Potter is a 'best-selling' novelist; Mr. Potter a flourishing Press magnate; the young Potters (Johnny and Jane, university bred) are members of the Anti-Potter League, a group of bright young people who 'talked and discussed and played . . . and thought they had found things out'. Then came the war and stopped their talk;

¹ Part III, § 1. ² *Tamarisk Town* (1919). ³ *Little England* (1918).

⁴ This kind of rural novel was deliciously parodied in Stella Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932).

then the armistice of 1918. The war-period briefly, and the post-war period at greater length, provided Rose Macaulay with opportunities for that dispersed irony which she used half maliciously, half contemptuously. Neither Potters nor Anti-Potters escape the lash. She regards humanity as a horde of 'minds crowded together, making a dense atmosphere, impervious to the piercing of truth. All this mass of stupid, muddled, huddled minds. . . . Greedy minds, ignorant minds, sentimental, truthless minds. . . .' The author's irony and satire are distributed so even-handedly that she cannot altogether escape the suspicion with which a universe of fools will regard the one wise person in their midst. Clear-minded, witty, and immensely diverting, Rose Macaulay nevertheless exposed too much. *Potterism*, and *Dangerous Ages* (1921), and (the best of these books) *Told by an Idiot* (1923) leave mankind stripped naked of the rags of illusion without which human souls cannot in decency walk abroad. Society is held together as much by its political, intellectual and spiritual *modistes* as by its dressmakers and tailors. By the time she wrote *Staying with Relations* (1930) Rose Macaulay had obviously exhausted the satiric vein and there was little inducement to look with interest to further books by her. But in 1932 she produced a novel of a different kind and one that at last worthily exercised her great talent. *They Were Defeated*, an historical novel of the seventeenth century, introduces the great poets of the time—Herrick, Marvell, Milton, Lovelace—and the Cambridge Platonists. Herrick is delightfully depicted at length, both as pastor and poet, and Rose Macaulay communicates a feeling of genuine excitement to the reader, as though he were actually meeting these eminent people. The novel is wise and witty, moving and tragic—a book to engage fully both mind and heart.

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As the youngest daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, Virginia Woolf no doubt lived in early years amid a scholarly circle

such as that of which she gives glimpses in her first and simplest novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), which should present no difficulty to readers who enjoy very good talk and are satisfied with action on the mental plane alone. *The Voyage Out* is to some extent reminiscent of Meredith's style, but in atmosphere it has little of the sharpness, the astringency, the hard clear outlines of Meredith. On the contrary, it has a golden radiance; its outlines are tremulous, like a landscape seen through a heat-haze; and the whole book is touched by an extraordinary sensitiveness, both emotionally and intellectually. If *The Voyage Out* has an affinity with the work of any other writer, it is with E. M. Forster's novels that it might be compared. There is the same sense of life so delicately poised, of people so sensitively balanced in thought and feeling, that the harsh breath of common life would cause the very structure of their culture to topple. A reader of *The Voyage Out* feels that it is essential to tread softly and to breathe lightly while in the company of the book. Beginners will find this the most satisfactory of Virginia Woolf's novels, for the narrative has more continuity than is to be found in her later stories, where she adopts a fragmentary method of presentation.

About the middle of the nineteen-twenties, in a pamphlet called *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, Virginia Woolf prophesied that we were on the verge of a new great age in English literature. She pleaded, however, that for the present we must 'tolerate the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure', because (she thought) the younger writers were feeling their way towards a new method of portraying character in fiction. She was herself one of the most important of the experimenters, and though, considered purely as fiction, her novels are unsatisfying to those schooled in the traditional mode of the English novelists from Fielding and Smollett to Dickens and on to Wells and Priestley, she has undoubtedly extended the boundaries of the novel. For her literary ancestry we may look back to Laurence Sterne rather than to the robust stylists just mentioned.

Virginia Woolf has made prose almost as sensitive an instrument as poetry. She might, indeed, be regarded as a poet who had the misfortune to be born into an age of prose. The improbabilities over which many readers stumbled in her *Orlando* (1928) would be accepted without a moment's surprise if they were presented in verse form. She has written numerous enchanting passages, which never lack the firmness and clarity of good prose, even when they incite to the mood of exaltation produced by poetry. Virginia Woolf is further distinguished by the demands which her imaginative writings make upon *all* our senses. Her books cannot receive an adequate reception from the intellect unaided; they invite the active co-operation of the reader's faculties of sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. In her story of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog, *Flush* (1933), she introduces us to a world of sensation in which smell is the liveliest sense, as it evidently is to a dog; and, invariably, in reading Virginia Woolf's books, it is essential that all channels of perception should be open and unobstructed. Reason must sometimes be held in check, as in the case of *Orlando* (called a biography, but partly a novel, partly a fantasy, partly a satire), which requires the initial concession that, in the world of the imagination, centuries and sexes may blend and blur. That concession once made, *Orlando* is easy to read and often beautiful in its descriptions and style. Various attempts have been made to interpret *Orlando* as allegory, though the concluding sentences might have led 'interpreters' to suspect that they were being inveigled into a wild-geese chase.

Virginia Woolf may have been right when she charged Arnold Bennett and others with encumbering their characters with too much material litter, yet Edwin Clayhanger, Soames Forsyte, Alfred Polly, do somehow convince us of their existence in an actual world. It is her own major weakness that all her characters talk alike—with their creator's voice—and rarely seem to live

outside her own mind, a limitation shared with some of E. M. Forster's people.

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Though she was induced to write an appreciation of Virginia Woolf,¹ Winifred Holtby's own novels had no eccentricities of style or manner. Her forebears were Yorkshire farmers, and she remained devoted to her family and county throughout a life which took her to work in France during the war of 1914-18, to post-war Oxford where she read history and wrote a rejected novel on Wiclif and his times, and to distant places as an ardent lecturer for the League of Nations Union. She was torn between her passion for writing and her conviction that she must work for understanding and peace between peoples. Her problem was unresolved when she died at the age of thirty-seven in 1936, and how much it troubled her is made clear in the biography of her by Vera Brittain (*Testament of Friendship*, 1940) and also in her own correspondence in *Letters to a Friend* (written to and edited, 1937, by Jean McWilliam). Winifred Holtby was not widely known at the time of her death, though her first novel *Anderby Wold* (1923) and *Poor Caroline* (1931) had received attention from the critics and a restricted public. But her long novel *South Riding* (1936), published posthumously, was enthusiastically received and widely read. In this work she combined admirable qualities as a novelist with a deep concern for social justice, creating a fine gallery of characters and extracting a considerable amount of story interest from the doings of a municipal council in her native county. An extremely able writer and an attractive personality, Winifred Holtby was somewhat too imposingly staged by her friends after she died, while the filming of *South Riding* brought a further spate of publicity. Her real quality as a woman is seen in the *Letters to a Friend* and in quoted letters and other personal fragments in Vera Brittain's book; as a

¹ *Virginia Woolf*, by Winifred Holtby, 1932.

writer, her possibilities may be gauged more impressively from the subtlety, humour, and pathos of *Poor Caroline* than from the broader and more homely display of her talents in *South Riding*.

| The extent of the loss sustained by English literature through the untimely deaths of Winifred Holtby, Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923), and Stella Benson (1892-1933) cannot be estimated. Though in other circumstances their output would undoubtedly have been much larger, each achieved enough to establish her importance. Katherine Mansfield (born in New Zealand) became famous first as a writer of short stories which in some respects naturalized in English the manner of Tchekov. She was especially happy in her studies of children, whom she made charming and touching without sentimentalizing them or abating the natural realism which is interwoven with fantasy in the child's life. Katherine Mansfield married John Middleton Murry (the critic and writer on philosophical subjects), who edited her journal and letters after she died. These (with *The Scrapbook of Katherine Mansfield*, 1939) increased her fame, and deservedly, for few finer expressions of a sensitive spirit and an exquisite mind have been given to the world. Stella Benson spent years in the Far East as the wife of an official in the Chinese Customs service. The contacts made in that way provided her with material for *Tobit Transplanted* (1931), but she had previously travelled in China, Japan, and the United States, recording her impressions with brilliancy and humour in *The Little World* (1925). *Living Alone* (1919) had found a receptive audience among those who were attuned to the delicately reticent self-revelation of that book, and later on when she developed a biting wit and an acute sense of the ridiculousness of things, a capacity for pain also became evident in her writings. Hers was a rare personality and the future may know her better than her immediate contemporaries could, for she left to the British Museum her manuscript diaries covering a long period, with instructions that

these should not be published within fifty years of her death.

Dorothy Sayers broke new ground for the woman novelist by specializing in detective fiction. She is frequently more ingenious in spinning a plot than convincing or interesting in unspinning it, and the character of her amateur investigator of crime, Lord Peter Wimsey, usually counts for more than the mysteries he solves. Lord Peter is not without a family likeness to the Mr. Fortune of H. C. Bailey's detective stories and to Bertie Wooster, P. G. Wodehouse's fool of genius, but Wimsey is an intellectual aristocrat with a nice taste in wine and rare books and a gift of abstruse quotation born of Dorothy Sayers's own intimate knowledge of the lesser as well as the principal English and other authors, a gift that ceases to delight only when it is too resolutely and habitually displayed. The Wimsey books are for the most part better as novels than as detective novels; they have wit, humour, good character-drawing, and a quality of high seriousness imparted to them by the author's religious sense, which compels her to view murder as a mortal sin—as a spiritual outrage—not simply as the starting-point of a puzzle procuring thrills for readers and royalties for authors. G. K. Chesterton's stories of Father Brown were the first of the kind to propound the spiritual issues, and Dorothy Sayers made a long step forward in the same direction. The intricate ingenuity of which she is capable may well be judged from *The Nine Tailors* (1934), her rank as a novelist proper from *Gaudy Night* (1935)—an excellent novel in which the detective element is apt to seem annoyingly intrusive—and her humour and common sense from *Murder Must Advertise* (1933).

The book-lists in the index pages (*post*, 245 ff.) should be consulted for titles of novels by Ann Bridge, I. Compton Burnett, Clemence Dane, 'Elizabeth', F. Tennyson Jesse, Rosamond Lehmann, E. Arnot Robertson, V. Sackville-West, G. B. Stern, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Rebecca

West, and E. H. Young, all among the outstanding women novelists of their period. To these names is to be added that of Elizabeth Bowen, whose work includes a movingly perceptive study of the disrupting effects of the acceleration of emotional development in a young girl whose mental development is proceeding at the normal slower pace—*Death of the Heart* (1938), distinguished as a piece of writing as well as for the unusual interest of its theme and treatment.

§ 7. *Detective Stories*

Passing reference has been made to detective fiction in the note above on Dorothy Sayers's novels, but a footnote must be added in regard to some general aspects of this branch of imaginative prose, which flourished for a long time as one of the uncultivated wildings of inventive minds, but was subsequently drawn into the arcana of the intellectualists. A pattern for the short detective story was supplied in certain of the *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* by the American Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49), while Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) is an admirable early full-length detective novel. But the wider popularity of this class of fiction began in 1891 with the first of the Sherlock Holmes short-stories and novels of Conan Doyle (1859-1930). Though when considered purely as a literary product these may seem sometimes contemptible—jejune in style and elementary in contrivance—the character of Sherlock Holmes is a memorable creation,¹ and his 'cases' supplied thrills and a certain degree of mental exercise in days before more ambitious writers brought into service a considerable amount of expert and pseudo-expert knowledge of criminology, forensic medicine, and cognate matters. And even when expertize became the mode,

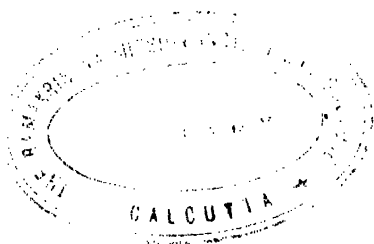
¹ He is understood to have been based by Doyle upon the eminent Edinburgh surgeon, Joseph Bell, some of whose characteristics are suggested in the likeable mannerisms and eccentricities of the detective.

Sherlock Holmes retained much of his original fascination—so much so, that learned men amused themselves and others by writing treatises on various aspects of the life and labours of the detective, whose non-existent rooms in Baker Street were also frequently sought by pilgrims. Conan Doyle, himself a doctor of medicine, was far from deficient in specialized knowledge, but an entertaining gusto was his most attractive quality as a writer. If a sustained richness of inventive ability were of primary importance to an author, Edgar Wallace (1875-1932) would require more than a passing salute from the many to whom he gave pleasure. He wrote (or dictated) novel after novel showing a good deal of unco-ordinated information about police methods and the criminal classes, but he had little or no concern with probability either in character or incident, and his books vanish from the mind almost as soon as the last page is turned. While they are often grand entertainment, they show the futility of energy expended without control.

Until 1913 the literary connoisseurs had given no professional attention to detective stories, but the publication in that year of *Trent's Last Case* by E. C. Bentley demonstrated that literary excellence was possible in this kind of fiction. An account of the genesis of the book is included in Bentley's autobiographical volume *Those Days* (1940). *Trent's Last Case* is first-rate both as a novel and as a detective story, and it avoids the trap of over-cleverness into which many of its author's followers were afterwards to fall. E. C. Bentley's friend, G. K. Chesterton, gave detective fiction yet another turn in the stories in which the amateur investigator was a Roman Catholic priest, Father Brown. Here the pivot of interest was a spiritual one—the innate sinfulness of man, manifested in chosen special instances—and the entertainment factor was subordinate to the religious motive. This attempt to Christianize crime stories was carried on with more literary ambition and psychological complexity by Dorothy Sayers. She also

introduced a welcome element of humour, though H. C. Bailey's Mr. Fortune stories had shown the way in this respect.

The possible variations on the crime and detective theme are innumerable, but a fairly comprehensive view of the field can be obtained from the books of those named above and of the following: Austin Freeman, Freeman Wills Crofts, Agatha Christie, A. E. W. Mason (also author of many novels of other types), Margery Allingham, Gladys Mitchell—a few among the scores who produced intelligent and readable examples. The ocean of crime fiction reached high tide in the late 'twenties and early 'thirties, and as a literary phenomenon no doubt had an obscure psychological basis in the conditions of living prevalent at the time, though the popularity of Gothic romances and tales of terror in the eighteenth century was to some extent analogous.



CHAPTER III

DRAMATISTS

§ 1. *The Twilight of the Drama*

AFTER THE death of Shakespeare and his contemporaries the drama in England suffered a decline for upwards of two centuries. Occasionally, during that long sickness, it seemed that the patient might recover, and make the English theatre again a place to which writers would turn as naturally as the Elizabethans had turned. But the hope was delusive; and neither Congreve in the seventeenth century, nor Sheridan and Goldsmith in the eighteenth, restored the drama to robust health.

The closing of the theatres by the Puritans in 1642 was less harmful than the order of release some twenty years later, after the accession of Charles II. Although the Restoration gave a strong impetus to the theatres, the profligacy of the Stuart Court was reflected so blatantly in the Restoration drama, in which intellectual brilliance fought a rearguard battle with cynical indecency, that others besides religious fanatics had reason to regard the theatre with disgust. Moreover, the drama was almost fatally handicapped by the grant of a Royal Patent to the managers of Covent Garden and Drury Lane theatres in 1662, which made these the only houses at which classical drama could legally be performed; for this purpose, 'classical drama' was regarded as including the plays of Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, Congreve, Otway, and some others. In 1766 the Royal Patent was extended (in a modified form) to the Haymarket Theatre, but other theatres were still restricted to plays of poor quality with musical accompaniment—whence the term *melo-drama*, now a byword for extravagantly false theatricalism.

Of course, the 'minor theatres' (as the non-Patent houses were called) found means to evade the royal imposition,

and it was at a minor theatre in Goodman's Fields, White-chapel, that David Garrick made his name as a great Shakespearian actor. But only by elaborate subterfuge could these houses produce 'classical' plays. At Garrick's first theatre, the audience paid its money for a brief musical entertainment, at the end of which a dramatic performance was provided, without charge. This ingenious method of evasion had obvious disadvantages, and it certainly was not a condition of affairs in which a healthy national drama could flourish. Nor was the Royal Patent lightly to be ignored. In 1819 and 1820, Junius Brutus Booth gave Shakespearian performances at the newly opened Coburg Theatre (now the 'Old Vic') in Waterloo Bridge Road. As a result the manager of the Coburg was prosecuted at the instigation of the management of Drury Lane and heavily fined.

Not until 1843 were efforts successful in removing these disabilities from the majority of London theatres. In that year the Theatre Regulation Act was at last passed by Parliament, and all regular theatres placed on an equal footing. Instead of three protected theatres with traditions and reputations to uphold, and a scattering of negligible smaller places, there sprang up a strangely assorted group of playhouses, all with equal legal rights. The old protected companies broke up and became distributed piecemeal elsewhere. Supernumeraries of Covent Garden, who might, with training, have developed into accomplished actors, hurried to small local theatres, where their immature powers failed to sustain them in more exacting parts.

There is no need to describe in detail how the London stage fared in these new throes of wretchedness. For twenty years and more a period of chaos ensued. During that time the theatre had no intellectual or social standing, and playgoers had perforce to leave their brains at home when setting out for the theatre.

The name of Thomas William Robertson (1829-71) is

inseparably associated with the beginning of the modern revival of English drama. Like other forerunners, he passed and became almost forgotten, and his plays now seem crude and commonplace. But he was a pioneer in bringing back life and intelligence to the theatre, and the production of Robertson's comedy, *Society*, by Marie Wilton and Squire Bancroft, at the Prince of Wales's Theatre, in November 1865, was a more important occasion than either dramatist or actors realized.

In the Bancrofts' company at a later date (1881-2), when they had removed to the Haymarket Theatre, was a young actor, Arthur Wing Pinero, who had previously been with Irving and the Wyndhams. He was the son of a lawyer and had been intended for his father's profession, but at nineteen he took to the stage. In 1882, Pinero abandoned acting for writing. Plays by him had already been performed by Irving, John Hare, and Mr. and Mrs. Kendal (Madge Robertson, T. W. Robertson's youngest sister). Pinero's first notable work, *The Money Spinner*, produced in 1881, was followed by other original plays and adaptations, before he established a reputation with what became known as the Court Theatre farces: *The Magistrate* (1885), *The Schoolmistress* (1886), and *Dandy Dick* (1887). Thereafter, he turned from farce to comedy, to more serious drama, and even to tragedy. In *Sweet Lavender* (1888) the influence of Robertson is seen; and *Trelawney of the Wells* (1898) is a delicate picture of the life of an earlier generation of actors, the character of Tom Wrench being a sketch-portrait of Robertson. *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (1893) was one of the first-fruits in England of the influence of Ibsen, though Pinero was far from expressively, in this and subsequent plays, the unorthodox individualism of the Norwegian dramatist. Pinero did something towards transporting to the English stage the work of Ibsen; but the inward substance of Ibsen's message provoked, in this country, an outburst of rage that a Bernard Shaw could face with imperturbable self-possession. Pinero had

an effective sense of stage situation; his plays are well written and his characters more lifelike than characters in English drama had been for generations before he began to write, though by the time of his own death in 1934 most of his plays appeared ludicrously naïve and artificial to a generation that was more sophisticated and better informed about life and its problems.

While Pincro was addressing himself to stagecraft and the literary aspects of drama, Henry Arthur Jones was promoting the development of social drama. He began with extravagant melodramatic pieces—the best known was *The Silver King* (1882)—but later conducted extensive propaganda designed to give the theatre a more important place in the social life of the time. He insisted that the drama should provide an uncompromising criticism of manners and institutions.

Another dramatist of the period, Oscar Wilde (1856–1900), brought into the theatre an acute and brilliant wit, while his care for style helped to clear the drama of verbiage and to make its dialogue keen-edged and clean-cut. His epigrams quickly lose their surprising and attractive impertinence, however; his characters are wooden, and his sentiments almost wantonly insincere. Yet he did much to improve the literary standing of the modern drama, and his own notoriously brilliant talk echoes through his plays. When, as in his last play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), the theme is entirely fantastic, his weaknesses become less obvious. This play has no purpose except to be gay; it is a brilliant piece of inconsequent extravagance; while, as a contribution to English comedy, it has been ranked with the plays of Sheridan. It ran in London even during the deepest disgrace of its author (whose name was meanwhile removed from the playbills!) and in 1939–40 surmounted the shock of a new war in a revival by a company including John Gielgud and Edith Evans.

The career of Stephen Phillips (1868–1915) was a curious

episode in contemporary theatrical history. The advertisement pages at the end of early editions of his plays quote the judgments of reputable critics whose praises could not have been warmer if Shakespeare had been under review. Stephen Phillips's poetic dramas show a smooth facility in versifying and a knowledge of stage technique, but they contain little true poetry or true drama. Yet the interest they aroused probably encouraged other writers and led to further experiments in poetic drama. Even if they did nothing else, Phillips's plays did indicate the limitations of Elizabethan blank verse for modern purposes, and led poets to seek a different medium. In that respect, Stephen Phillips was at least of negative importance in the development of modern dramatic literature; and there are still those who consider that an English National Theatre should include *Paolo and Francesca* (1899) in its regular repertory.

§ 2. *George Bernard Shaw*

There came to London from Dublin in 1876 a young Protestant Irishman, belonging to a family that prided itself upon being connected with 'the gentility'. His father, a feckless and impecunious gentleman, was related to a baronet; and his mother, grown weary of her husband's shiftless ways, had preceded her son to England. This obscure youth—George Bernard Shaw—had little money, no prospects, and no hope of settled employment; yet he was able to say, twenty years later, 'My destiny was to educate London.'

He was born in Dublin in 1856, began his education under an uncle, the Rev. William George Carroll, and went on to the Wesleyan Connexional School in Dublin, where (as he has said) he learnt little--mainly because he himself did little and relied upon the help of two more brilliant boys, whom he repaid by reciting stories from Homer.

Mrs. George Carr Shaw, his mother, was the "

Woman' before the New Woman had properly arrived. Independent and self-reliant, she cared nothing for the frowns of the orthodox. Music was her great passion, and the Shaws' home became a rehearsal centre for the amateur operatic society of which she and her singing master, George John Vandeleur Lee, were the leaders: Lee as producer and conductor, Mrs. Shaw as *prima donna*. At the age of fifteen, young G. B. S. had memorized operas and oratorios by Mozart, Handel, Beethoven, Rossini, Mendelssohn, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Gounod. He whistled these as a London street-boy whistles music-hall songs; and when, not long afterwards, he was working as an accountant in a Dublin land office, he taught the artiched pupils under him to sing (in office hours!) Italian operatic arias. In March 1876, he walked out of the office and crossed St. George's Channel.

Shaw spent over sixteen years in London before his first play was produced, and in the nine years between 1876 and 1885 earned only £6 by spasmodic literary efforts—£5 being for a patent-medicine advertisement. He wrote five novels¹ which were refused by publishers, though two or three of the stories ran serially in small magazines, and all have since been published in book form, the first, *Immaturity*, with a valuable autobiographical preface. In 1882 he heard a speech by Henry George on Land Nationalization, which fired him to enlist in 'the liberative war of humanity'. At that time, also, he came under the influence of Shelley's humanitarian and vegetarian doctrines. Shaw's circle of friends included Sidney Webb (afterwards a Labour peer, Lord Passfield) and other socialistic thinkers, and he became a member of the Fabian Society, founded in January 1884, for the propagation of Socialist principles by methods of investigation, education, and general penetration—as opposed to the militant policy of cataclysmic change. Some of Shaw's earliest writings were scene for the Fabian Society's economic and political tracts.

¹ For titles see Index.

During those years of political agitation and ferment, G. B. S. determined to become an effective public speaker. He took every opportunity that offered for addressing public meetings, and was a familiar figure at street-corners and in the rooms of debating societies. By 1885 he was reduced to 'quite straitened financial circumstances', and with the help of introductions from William Archer, began his career as a journalist, writing for the *Pall Mall Gazette* and *The World*. He was appointed music critic to *The Star* in 1888; in 1895 dramatic critic of the *Saturday Review*, at that time entering a new phase of brilliance with Frank Harris as editor. The two volumes of *Dramatic Opinions and Essays* (later entitled *Our Theatres in the 'Nineties*), gathered from G. B. S.'s contributions to the *Saturday Review*, have been overshadowed by his later works; but the essays should be read for their freshness and originality, their sound standards of judgment, and their lively wit and Shavian audacity.

At that time the 'New Journalism' was being born in England. Compulsory elementary education began in the year he arrived in London, and by about 1895 a new reading public was growing up. The settled dignity of the Press began to be shaken by new methods, and by new periodicals in which liveliness was considered more important than authority. One of the liveliest new journalists was Bernard Shaw. Whatever he said or wrote was governed by the determination to make himself heard, and to keep his hearers alert. 'In order to get a hearing,' he says, 'it was necessary for me to attain the footing of a privileged lunatic, with the licence of a jester. . . . My method is to take the utmost trouble to find the right thing to say, and then to say it with the utmost levity. And all the time the real joke is that I am in earnest.' Already, before he climbed on to the theatre stage, he had impressed himself upon public notice. His quick, eager, destructive questioning of social institutions provided the mental stimulant for which the younger generation was ready.

Though he aroused hatred, he also gathered an enthusiastic following. As a matter of considered policy he lived in the limelight and used the paraphernalia of the circus to attract and hold his audience. He behaved, consciously, as a mountebank, employing the weapons of laughter and ridicule to attack bad housing, bad education, bad conditions of labour, bad morals, and other social evils which troubled him so deeply that he would have paraded London with a barrel-organ and in a clown's attire if he could have got a hearing upon no other condition; for, he held, 'it is only the man who has no message who is too fastidious to beat the drum at the door of his booth'.¹

After trying many devices and using many platforms, Shaw concluded that the stage was the finest platform in the world. He climbed on to the stage, taught himself the dramatist's job, and in addition to being a great controversialist became an almost supremely great dramatist. His plays fall short of perfection—as whose do not? Some of his characters are mechanical mouthpieces, rather than human beings standing upon their own feet and using their own tongues. He has lapses from good taste: his humour is sometimes tiresome and feeble. Yet when all deductions are made, and when Shakespeare has been put at the head of the roll of English dramatists, who is to be placed second if not Shaw? Ben Jonson, Marlowe, Congreve, Webster, Tourneur, Sheridan? The failings of any of these are no fewer than those of Shaw, though they may be different failings; their achievements seem less than his. Not one of them directed and dominated the thought of the seventeenth or eighteenth century as Shaw directed and dominated the thought of the early twentieth century—in England and beyond. Not one of them was moved by a blaze of moral passion, as Shaw was. Not one of them had a greater command of rhetoric or a more brilliant wit. Some of them are great poets—as Shaw is not; yet which of them commands a better prose style than Shaw at his best?

¹ Preface to *Three Plays by Brieux* (1911).

Whatever Bernard Shaw's actual stature as a dramatist, his potential stature was still greater, for he hampered his literary ability by subordinating it to his moral purpose. He became the Knight of the Burning Pencil, a crusader whose appointed lifework was the endeavour to restore colour and light and joy to England's once green and pleasant land. The eighteen-nineties, the period of his beginnings, was a period of 'art for art's sake'. Bernard Shaw, however, could find no justification for art that was not controlled by moral passion; his watchword was 'art for life's sake'; "'for art's sake" alone I would not face the toil of writing a single sentence'.¹ He is a natural literary artist fettered by reforming zeal, and his plays are a continuous record of the long struggle between artist and moralist. Whenever he found himself writing as an artist, as a master of prose, he was possessed by the dread of being *merely* an artist, a dilettante. He realized his great command of majestic rhetoric, and feared lest it should become a mental drug, tending to make audiences dull and solemn. When he suspected any such danger, his method of correction was (he has said) to 'introduce a joke and knock the solemn people off their perch'. Perhaps G. B. S. underrated the good sense of his audiences. Whatever the motive, it does not appear that any benefit—moral, psychological, or literary—came (for example) from following the sublime rhetoric of Caesar's address to the sphinx with the childish prattle of Cleopatra,² and it is fortunate that his distrust of the aesthetic element did not rob us of such things as Joan's speeches before her judges (*Saint Joan*), the litany at the end of that same play, the last speech of Lilith (*Back to Methuselah*), the opening scene and the interlude to *The Apple Cart*.

Bernard Shaw began as a dramatist in 1885, about six years after the earliest performance in England of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. It is possible to over-emphasize the extent

¹ *Man and Superman*: Epistle Dedicatory.

² *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1901): Act I.

of Ibsen's influence upon Shaw, strong though it was. The unorthodox trend of his mind had been evident before he left Dublin, and before he knew anything of Ibsen. Contact with Ibsen's ideas did not bring about a revolutionary change of mental attitude in Shaw, it only confirmed an attitude previously adopted. He was impressed by the 'technical novelty' of Ibsen's plays; by his judgments upon ideals and idealists; and by his anti-romantic impatience of 'the womanly woman'. Ibsen's conviction that the real slavery of his day was 'slavery to ideals of goodness' was heartily approved by Shaw, for he, too, believed that unrestrained idealism was unintelligent idealism, without thought or reasoning, and therefore dangerous, destructive, and pernicious.¹ G. B. S. claimed, emphatically, the right of private judgment on all questions of conduct, as against the conventional habit of allegiance to 'accepted' institutions: 'conduct must justify itself by its effect upon happiness and not by its conformity to any rule or ideal'.²

To Shaw, the practice of questioning orthodox and 'accepted' standards of belief is at once the beginning of wisdom and the beginning of goodness. Anything that is popular (in the sense of being automatically accepted as the best thing possible) should, he believes, be looked upon with suspicion—whether it be vaccination, an educational system, the family, or a religion. One of his first propositions was that good institutions and bad institutions alike were regarded with confidence by the multitude only because the whole mass of accepted institutions had hardened into *custom*; so that what is *customary* is likely to be confused with what is virtuous and what is right. His career has been one long incitement to insistent questioning of *What is*, with the purpose of establishing a rightful conception of *What should be*: 'Progress is not achieved by panicstricken rushes back and forward between one folly

¹ See *Brand* for Ibsen's most massive presentation of this theme.

² *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891).

and another, but by sifting all movements and adding what survives the sifting to the fabric of our morality.¹

Widowers' Houses, the first of Shaw's plays, was started in collaboration with William Archer, but, on Archer's withdrawal, the manuscript lay untouched for nearly seven years. It was at length completed by Shaw alone, and produced at the Independent Theatre by J. T. Grein towards the end of 1892. In 1898 the first collection of Bernard Shaw's plays appeared: *Plays: Pleasant and Unpleasant*, in two volumes. *Widowers' Houses* should be described as an economic tract in dramatic form. The characters are mostly (and intentionally) shown as hypocrites and humbugs: Trench is an ignorant sentimentalist, Blanche Sartorius a designing minx with a touch of insane unrestraint. It is, however, a lively and humorous tract; the opposing groups of characters are permitted to state their own case fairly; but there is no dramatic objectivity—i.e., the persons in the play automatically project the author's own attitudes and principles. Here, in his first play, Shaw's stock-character—the obtuse, thick-skinned, unimaginative, humourless Englishman—already appears. This character, the Cokane of 1892, is brother to a dozen others down to the de Stogumber of 1924 (in *Saint Joan*). These absurd Englishmen of Bernard Shaw's have been much abused by critics; but a more dispassionate consideration might suggest that they have a long and interesting ancestry. In respect of themselves they are Shaw's own creation—and not one of his best. Yet in respect of their dramatic function in the plays, they might be compared with the buffoons of an earlier tradition: the Vice of the medieval drama, and the Fool of the Elizabethan—before the Fool had been transformed by Shakespeare from a buffoon into a philosophic and poetic genius.

The stage situations in *Widowers' Houses* are contrived with less dramatic power than those in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, yet in each of the three *Unpleasant Plays* the

¹ Preface to *Three Plays by Brieux*.

characters remain as puppets controlled by the hand of the puppet-master. In *Pleasant Plays*, for the first time, the ideas become less important than the persons who state them—but the ideas lose none of their force. *Arms and the Man* is a success, not because of its ideas—impressive though these are—but because Bluntschli picks up the play and walks off with it on his shoulders. The artist in Shaw had already begun to play pranks with the moralist. William the butler in *You Never Can Tell*, is another excellently individualized creation, as also are the majority of the people in *Candida*, the most satisfying of the early plays.

These two volumes, then, as well as the *Three Plays for Puritans* (1901) which followed, show G. B. S. the preacher struggling in the embraces of the siren, Art. The only desire of the preacher was to communicate his ideas and convictions. The dramatic artist had other desires. Though the preacher succeeded in keeping his feet, he had to fight constantly against the pull and lure of 'mere literature'.

By 1903, when *Man and Superman* appeared, Bernard Shaw was a fully equipped playwright. His apprentice days were over, and he was equal to whatever demands the theatre and the dramatic form could make. The later plays do not, however, show him going from strength to strength. It is now pull devil, now pull baker, as reforming zeal or literary power gets the upper hand. In *Man and Superman* the ideas are more memorable than the characters, and there is little reliance upon stage situation; but the tremendous stirring of moral and intellectual passion is compensation enough. Described by the author as 'A Comedy and a Philosophy', this play was Bernard Shaw's earliest full statement of his conception of the Way of Salvation for the human race, through obedience to the Life Force, the term he uses to indicate a power continually working upon the hearts of men and endeavouring to impel them towards a better and fuller life. In later days the Life Force seems to become more and more closely identified with what most people mean when they speak of the Will

of God and the Holy Ghost.¹ Though Shaw's Life Force is not anthropomorphic, in its functions it is not vastly different from the Christian idea of the function of the Holy Ghost. It might be described as the Holy Ghost denuded of personality—IT, not *He*. If in future times the medieval habit of posthumously Christianizing the works of non-Christian writers should be resumed, the editing of Bernard Shaw on such lines would be a comparatively simple task, demanding only a few suppressions here and there, and the substitution of some Christian term for the words Life Force. G. B. S. has himself led the way by writing, in his essay on Parents and Children, 'the child feels the drive of the Life Force (often called the Will of God)'.² But even if 'the Will of God' had exactly defined Shaw's idea of the directing power behind Man, he would not have used the more familiar words, for he was convinced that over-familiarity with current phrases is the great obstacle to clear thought and positive action. If he had written about 'the Will of God', only the already converted would have listened to him. He chose, instead, to write about an apparently new discovery, the Life Force. But the Life Force was nothing newer than God. If the religion of Bernard Shaw was, to twentieth-century ears, more attractive than orthodox aspects of faith, this was largely because of the invigorating call put into Barbara's mouth: 'I have got rid of the bribe of heaven. Let God's work be done for its own sake: the work he had to create us to do because it cannot be done except by living men and women.'³ The idea of working for the world's good without thought of personal reward, here or hereafter (an insistent idea in twentieth-century literature,)⁴ is in sharp

¹ 'The man who was scientific enough to see that the Holy Ghost is the most interesting of all the hard facts of life got easily in front of the blockheads who could only sin against it.'—*Back to Methuselah*: Preface.

² Preface to *Misalliance* (1910). ³ *Major Barbara* (1905): Act III.

⁴ Cf. quotation from H. G. Wells's *Christina Alberta's Father*, *ante*, p. 27.

contrast with the familiar Christian desire for eternal personal felicity.

The philosophy (or the religion) of the Life Force, introduced in *Man and Superman*, ran through most of the later plays. Unlike Hardy's Immanent Will, Shaw's Life Force is represented as a power making consciously towards a state of existence far more abundantly vital than anything yet experienced by mankind. But the Life Force does not purpose to work unaided: men and women are required to act as willing and eager agents for the furtherance of its great work. The existing race of men, however (so Shaw thought in 1903), was too mean-spirited and too self-centred to serve the Life Force, which would consequently be compelled to supersede Man by a more effective instrument of its will—the Superman. The means likely to be adopted for the production of that higher type were suggested in *Man and Superman* (1903), where Woman is indicated as 'Nature's contrivance for perpetuating its achievement', and Man as 'Woman's contrivance for fulfilling Nature's behest' that the Superman should be born to replace the existing 'feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances'.¹ In *The Revolutionist's Handbook* (appended to *Man and Superman*) Shaw turned back to scriptural language to express his convictions: there he speaks of Man as the Temple of the Holy Ghost; and urges, "'ye must be born again" and "born different"".

The crux of the whole problem, in Shaw's interpretation, is whether Man will or will not address himself to 'the work of helping Life in its struggle upward'.² If Man will not undertake this work, if he will not help towards getting himself born again and born different—if, indeed, he sets obstacles in the way, or becomes, himself, a passive obstacle—what is to happen? Will the Life Force permit its purposes to be thwarted in order that Man may enjoy the prerogative of 'free will'? The latter question was answered by Shaw with emphatic negatives in more than

¹ *Man and Superman*: Epistle Dedicatory.

² *Ibid.*

one of the plays that followed *Man and Superman*;¹ until, at length, the unregarded warning of those negatives blazed up into prophetic denunciation of 'cultured, leisured Europe'. *Heartbreak House* was commenced in 1913, and even while Shaw was writing to remind men and women that Nature's patience was not inexhaustible, the judgment fell; and a generation that did not know how to live was forced back upon demonstrating, in a World War, that it knew how to die. Nature 'demoralizes us with long credits and reckless overdrafts, and then . . . suddenly Nature takes her revenge'.² When Mazzini Dunn remarks that there is much to be said for the theory of an overruling Providence, Captain Shotover replies: 'Every drunken skipper trusts to Providence. But one of the ways of Providence with drunken skippers is to run them on the rocks.'³ To G. B. S., a generation that gave no heed to the purposes of the Life Force was like the drunken skipper to whom there comes—late, perhaps, but surely—'the smash of the ship on the rocks, the splintering of her rotten timbers, the tearing of her rusty plates, the drowning of the crew like rats in a trap'. That was his vision of Europe in *Heartbreak House* (1919). There followed *Back to Methuselah* (1921), in which Shaw considered further the causes of the smash of the ship of Europe on the rocks, and contemplated the outlook for the future. Once again the purposes and claims of the Life Force were stressed; once again, and in plainer terms than before, he spoke his warning: that if Man did not come up to the mark, Man would be replaced (perhaps catastrophically) by a less tragically futile creature. G. B. S. proclaimed that the effect of modern civilization had been to store up 'the social disease and corruption which explode from time to time in gigantic boils that have to be lanced by a million bayonets'; and he went on to say:

¹ Particularly in *The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet* (1909).

² *Heartbreak House*: Preface.

³ *Heartbreak House*: Act III.

This situation has occurred so often before, always with the same result of a collapse of civilization. . . . This does not mean that if Man cannot find the remedy no remedy will be found. The power that produced Man when the monkey was not up to the mark, can produce a higher creature than Man if Man does not come up to the mark. What it means is that if Man is to be saved, Man must save himself.¹

He laid the heaviest blame for the alleged failure of civilization upon Darwin and the theory of Natural Selection, which had (Shaw believed) 'banished mind from the universe' and created a stultifying conviction that life was 'a chapter of accidents' not capable of being modified or controlled by human action. He pleaded for the substitution of Creative Evolution—his 'religion of the twentieth century'—which teaches not only that Man is the potential Superman, but also that Man can himself hasten the evolutionary process by 'willing' his own upward development: 'If the giraffe can develop his neck by wanting and trying, a man can develop his character in the same way. . . . Indifference will not guide nations through civilization to the establishment of the perfect city of God.'² The Life Force is not named so frequently in *Back to Methuselah* as in *Man and Superman*, but it remains the power behind the idea of Creative Evolution. The ultimate desire of the Life Force is to establish the city of God on earth. The intention at the back of the idea of Creative Evolution is that Man should work intentionally (*creatively*) towards the evolution of a human type that will be strong enough to establish and worthy enough to maintain the earthly paradise. Creative Evolution was the doctrine commended by Shaw as a means through which the desire of Man and the purpose of the Life Force might be made identical.

For years to come, Bernard Shaw's ideas may continue to overshadow the literary aspect of his work. But in one mature play that is quite out of date in its subject-matter

¹ *Back to Methuselah*: Preface.

² *Ibid.*

(*John Bull's Other Island*, 1904) it is possible to see the dramatic strength behind the fabric of topical interests. This play remains one of his most effective pieces, displaying his dramatic power—mastery of rhetoric and exalted prose, effective handling of stage situation, skill in depicting character, and sense of comedy. Elsewhere, of course, these merits are unmistakable, particularly in *Saint Joan* (1924), where, also, as in previous plays,¹ the Discussion Scene is employed with triumphant effect. One of the most thrilling experiences that could come to a theatregoer was to be present at an early performance of *Saint Joan*, as a unit of a great theatre-audience held spellbound—motionless and silent for some half an hour—while three men sat at a table on the stage and did nothing but talk, *talk*, TALK.² In 1903, G. B. S. wrote, 'I wanted a pit of philosophers.' Twenty years later he had a theatreful, night after night. Some were not profound philosophers, perhaps; but at least they had brought their brains to the theatre—what is more, they were using their brains—and they were thrilled, as perhaps they had rarely been thrilled before, by the power of words and the excitement of ideas.

But the fact that Shaw was always a *laughing* philosopher made him suspect to the Solemn Old of the nineteen-tens and caused him to be rejected by the Solemn Young of the nineteen-thirties. To the former group he was morally a menace, to the latter politically and sociologically a trifle. Yet he did far more for sane moral and political education than his detractors had the power or the wit to do. He was the master of words and notions, not their slave; he was sure enough in his own faith to continue to be heartily good-tempered about it, even when he found himself in the midst of an insurgent generation that identified jutting jaws with strength of mind and bad manners with force of argument.

Shaw's astonishing mental agility continued without

¹ e.g., *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1906): Act I.

² *Saint Joan*: Scene IV.

abating into his eighties, and, only a few years before, he wrote, in *Saint Joan* (1924), what is probably his best all-round play, though he had had greater moments of genius in other works. *The Apple Cart* (1930) is both one of his wisest and most genial pieces, wise not so much because of the political acumen of King Magnus as for the dicta on the art of self-sufficingness in the opening dialogue and on the art of human relationships in the interlude, which is also a passage of sparkling comedy rarely equalled in the modern English theatre. Shaw's plays from *The Apple Cart* to the end of the nineteen-thirties were mostly topical commentaries upon the European nightmare: *Too True to Be Good* (1931), *On the Rocks* (1933), and *Geneva* (1939) have flashes of Shavian fire, though, like *In Good King Charles's Golden Days* (1939), they suggest that the playwright was tiring of his medium. But always, when he chose to be so, Bernard Shaw was a master of the spoken word (a gift he acquired in his early days of public speaking) even as in his prefaces he is a master of the written word in the succession of Bunyan and Defoe.

§ 3. *John Galsworthy*

In his essays, John Galsworthy speaks of 'naturalistic technique' in relation to both the novel and the drama, not indeed as the ideal technique, but as a method offering definite advantages. Naturalistic art, he says, 'is like a steady lamp, held up from time to time, in whose light things will be seen for a space clearly and in due proportion, freed from the mists of prejudice and partisanship'.¹ The parallelism between these words and the allegory of Cethru² is sufficiently close to make it evident that Galsworthy desired to reproduce, both upon the stage and in his books, the natural spectacle of life, presented with detachment. The influences operating against this desire have been

¹ *Some Platitudes Concerning Drama* (in *The Inn of Tranquillity*).

² See *ante*, p. 37.

referred to on a previous page.¹ Those delicate sympathies which made him so gently persuasive a partisan in the novels are fully active in the plays also, and since dramatic technique demands a form of treatment less expansive than that natural to the novel, stage plays gave Galsworthy little scope for concealing the direction of his own sympathies. He was drawn into the faint mist of partisanship, sometimes by (1) his choice of incident at the climax of a play; sometimes by (2) an alienating strain of blatancy in a particular character; sometimes by (3) the emotional weight of a 'third party' commentator. Illustration of these points is necessary.

(1). In *Strife* (1909) the case for both sides is seen, 'for a space, clearly and in due proportion'. When the play begins, old John Anthony is presiding with adamant absolutism over a meeting of the directors of the Trenartha Tin Plate Works on the Welsh border. A strike has been going on for four months, through a hard winter, and tentative movements on both sides towards a settlement are prevented from making progress only by the persistent 'No compromise!' cry of John Anthony for the owners, and the equally unyielding 'No surrender!' of David Roberts, the men's leader. But at a critical moment, when the men are wavering, Roberts's wife dies. Both sides yield simultaneously, and, throwing over their leaders, accept the precise terms they had rejected four months earlier. In the interval there has been suffering, privation and death on the side of the men, and heavy financial loss by the owners. In the earlier part of the play the scales are held dispassionately by the dramatist, and the audience feels only the desperate futility of the tragic pride and prejudice on both sides. But then, by his choice of incident at the climax of the play, Galsworthy destroys in a moment the illusion of impartiality. The death of Mrs. Roberts is not an appeal to human instincts of harmony and justice; it is an appeal to humanitarian sentiment which, "

¹ *Ante*, p. 38.

fundamentally, has no bearing upon the real problem of *Strife*.

(2). *The Skin Game* (1920) presents the conflict between Hillcrist, one of the better type of old-established aristocratic landed proprietor, and the loud, pushful, uncultured, new-rich manufacturer, Hornblower. Dissension has arisen between the two families because the Hillcrist will not accord social recognition to Hornblower's family. In his resentment, Hornblower buys a beautiful estate, The Centry, which provides the Hillcrist with one of their finest views; and on The Centry he purposes to build a factory—unless the Hillcrist admit the Hornblowers' right to a place in the social sun. Mrs. Hillcrist, discovering that Chloe (Hornblower's daughter-in-law) has a questionable past, proposes—in opposition to the wishes of her husband and her daughter—to use this information as a weapon of protection against Hornblower's scheme of aggression. Chloe, in dread of the threatened revelation, attempts suicide, and at the end of the play (in the printed version) she is carried in, just breathing: a victim hunted between two forces—neither having any direct grievance against her. The motto of the play is: 'Who touches pitch shall be defiled'; and a question repeatedly on the lips of Hillcrist and his delightful daughter Jill is: 'What's gentility worth if it can't stand fire?' A case is stated (and well stated) for both sides, but Hornblower's case is weakened by the blatancy of the man himself. It is the same phase in the problem of social replacement as H. G. Wells comments upon in *Tono-Bungay*, and it is fair to say that (although he makes no claim to impartiality) Wells there 'directs' the sympathies of his audience less definitely than Galsworthy does in *The Skin Game*. When Hornblower concludes a discussion by shouting, 'I'm going on with as little consideration as if ye were a family of blackbeetles,' it is difficult for any audience to retain a balanced sense of justice.

(3). *Justice* (1910) is a commentary upon the prison

administration of that period.¹ Falder, a young unstable-minded solicitor's clerk, alters a cheque, with the idea of getting money to help Ruth Honeywell to escape from a brutal husband, and is sent to penal servitude. Cokeson, the managing clerk of the office where Falder was employed, visits him in the prison a month before his term of solitary confinement expires. In a subsequent interview with the prison chaplain, Cokeson says:

I can't help thinking that to shut him up there by himself'll turn him silly. And nobody wants that, I s'pose. I *don't* like to sec a man cry.

The Chaplain. It's a very rare thing for them to give way like that.

Cokeson (looking at him—in a tone of sudden dogged hostility). I keep dogs.

The Chaplain. Indeed?

Cokeson. Ye-es. And I say this: I wouldn't shut one of them up all by himself, month after month, not if he'd bit me all over. . . . If you treat 'em with kindness they'll do anything for you; but to shut 'em up alone, it only makes 'em savage.

The legitimacy of Cokeson's view is not in question; the point is that the effect of his remarks upon an average audience is the effect of an emotional bludgeoning; and such emotional reactions as naturally follow from this are a hindrance and not an aid to impartiality and the dealing of even-handed justice.

Disproportionate attention was given to the social and ethical problems in Galsworthy's novels and plays, and there was a consequent tendency to overlook his remarkable technical efficiency as a dramatist. William Archer was among those who pointed out the fullness of effect obtained by the utmost economy of means in the opening scene of *The Silver Box* (1909). The curtain goes up on an empty, well-furnished dining-room; the electric light is burning; the clock shows that the time is after midnight. The door

¹ It was credibly reported that certain prison reforms introduced shortly after this date were due to *Justice*.

is opened fumblingly by a young man in evening dress, benevolently drunk. He is carrying a lady's velvet bag. In the first speech, which consists of only fifty-nine broken words, incoherently spoken, the audience learns:

- (1) That the house is the young man's home.
- (2) That he has had to have assistance from a stranger in order to get into the house.
- (3) That the velvet bag is the property of a temporary lady companion who has annoyed him.
- (4) That he has purloined her bag in order to 'pay her out'.
- (5) That he has forgotten to 'tip' the man who helped him in.
- (6) That he has in his pocket only one shilling (which he drops and loses among the furniture).

Six facts, several of them important in the development of the play, are thus conveyed in fifty-nine broken words; and each of those facts excites interest and stimulates curiosity. But that is not the whole of the dramatic content of those few minutes. The young man has taken a cigarette out of a silver box lying on the table—thus drawing attention to the mainspring of the play. And the apparently unimportant action of dropping his last shilling sets that mainspring in motion. The dropping of the shilling is the most important factor in the play, for if the young man had kept hold of his shilling, or if he had had other money in his pocket, he would have been able to tip the man who helped him into the house; the man, being paid, would have gone away; and there would have been no consequent series of events. Therefore, in addition to providing an important body of information about the characters, the words and actions of those opening moments also contain the nucleus of the ensuing tragi-comedy. When the young man has dropped his last shilling, he goes out to tell his guide that he has no money to give to him, and then returns with him to give him a drink in lieu

of cash. This second man is seen to be fairly young but shabbily dressed, haggard and shady-looking, with a suspicious air. It is learnt, in a few further words, that Borthwick's father is a Liberal Member of Parliament, and that Jones's wife is the Borthwicks' charwoman. In the course of a further short rambling speech, more light is thrown upon the velvet bag and its owner, before young Borthwick falls asleep on the sofa. Jones is then free to get drunk on the whisky. Partly as a result of his natural predatory instinct, and partly because of whisky-inspired malevolence, he steals the cigarette box, and also the crimson silk purse from the lady's handbag, before (without waking Borthwick) he leaves the house; and the scene closes. If account be taken of what is conveyed to the audience in that one short passage, it will be seen that already, in his first play, Galsworthy was an able dramatist who delighted in his craft. The economy of construction noted in *The Silver Box* is also a characteristic of other plays by him. There is here, moreover, an effective economy of style and characterization, which in the later plays runs to extremes. In *A Bit o' Love* (1915) and in *Loyalties* (1922), the treatment and the language are so denuded of superfluity as to be almost threadbare. Dialogue in a play, though it must be free from cloudiness, ambiguity, and tautology, cannot afford to be meagre and bare. The illusion of life upon the stage depends largely upon the quality of the dialogue, which must have warmth and a certain richness, and, even, what might be called a fine excess.¹ Simplicity of aim and singleness of purpose are merits in literature, but when these are carried too far the result is bloodlessness and absence of human warmth. *Loyalties* is saved from bloodlessness only by the character of Jacob Twisden the old solicitor, but neither he nor any other character in Galsworthy's later plays can compare with Mrs. Jones, the charwoman, in *The Silver Box*, or John Anthony in *Strife*. The latter, though a monument

¹ Cf. comments upon Granville Barker, p. 116

of human stubbornness, is cast in a tremendously impressive mould; and of the memorable episodes in Galsworthy's plays probably the finest is John Anthony's cry when, after half a century of work, he is flung overboard by his fellow-directors: 'Fifty years! You have disgraced me, gentlemen.'

§ 4. *The Irish Theatre*

From the middle of the eighteenth century down to the beginning of the twentieth the chief additions to English drama were the work of Irishmen. Until the end of the nineteenth century, however, there was no Irish drama. Sheridan and Goldsmith, Wilde and Shaw, were not engaged with Irish themes. Bernard Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island*, an Irish play, is an isolated example. Shaw, like his predecessors, is an English *dramatist* though he is an Irish *man*. In the Victorian period there were lesser Irish playwrights who took Irish subjects, but such plays as Dion Boucicault's *Colleen Bawn* and *Arrah-na-Pogue* do not belong either to literature or to life. They helped to perpetuate the 'stage Irishman'—a travesty which the new Irish drama set itself to destroy.

William Butler Yeats, the leader of the new movement, was born in Dublin in 1865, and spent some years of his early life in Sligo, the background to much of his work. His father was Jack B. Yeats the artist, and the family were in London for some time while W. B. Yeats was still a boy; he was educated first at Hammersmith and afterwards in Dublin. When about twenty-two years old he returned to London, and became acquainted with W. E. Henley, William Morris, Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw, and others. Yeats went back to Dublin in 1891, having established in London an Irish Literary Society in which he enrolled all the Irish authors and journalists in the metropolis. He founded a similar Literary Society in Ireland in 1892, regarding it as a preliminary to his great hope of establishing an Irish National Theatre. That hope was

realized in 1899. Much had previously been done by the Gaelic League to revive popular interest in the old fairy stories and folk-lore of the Irish people. Yeats himself had been inspired by the Gaelic movement, and he was convinced that through a wide dissemination of these Celtic myths, not alone Ireland but the whole world might be stimulated. No form of literary art then moved so large an audience as the acted drama, and drama was the medium to which Yeats looked. Yet the only means then available for producing plays was the commercial theatre, representing all that he detested: stage-conventions were anathema to him; stage-realism the very antithesis of the symbolism which moved him strongly. When, therefore, the Irish Literary Theatre gave its first performance at the Antient Concert Rooms in Dublin on May 8, 1899, the *play* was the main thing, and stage-setting comparatively unimportant.

A beginning was made with the help of Lady Gregory and the backing of a group of guarantors upon whom it was never necessary to make any call. At first, English actors and an English producer were engaged, though (at least in intention) the scheme was thoroughly Irish. The plays chosen for the first performance were Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*, and *The Heather Field*, a modern play by Edward Martyn. The opening season was so promising that, in the next year, the promoters were able to accept an invitation to give their performances at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin.

The Irish Literary Theatre, with professional English actors performing Irish plays under an English producer, lasted only three seasons. In 1902, an Irish amateur company of players under W. G. Fay—in co-operation with Yeats and Lady Gregory—produced *Deirdre*, by A. E.,¹ and *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, by W. B. Yeats, at St. Teresa's Hall, Dublin; and out of that performance grew the Irish National Theatre Society and the world-renowned Irish

¹ George Russell.

Players. In 1904 Miss A. E. F. Horniman¹ provided money to enable the company to acquire and reconstruct the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, which became the permanent home of the Society. The opportunities afforded by the Irish National Theatre Society made it possible for young Irish dramatists of merit to get a hearing. Although reasonable financial success was secured by the Irish Players, they took risks that commercial managers would not have taken; artistic sincerity and literary promise were regarded as more important than immediate profit.

The first prominent figure among the dramatists of the Irish literary theatre movement was, of course, W. B. Yeats himself. His *The Countess Cathleen* (1892) and *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894) became widely known, but their popularity depended more upon poetic charm and strangeness than upon dramatic power. In such an exacting medium as poetic drama exceptional skill is required to maintain the balance between poetry, action, and characterization. Yeats's plays are defective in their organic construction. They do not create the illusion of possible people behaving credibly and using an appropriate speech-medium. Though the characterization is more effective in *The Land of Heart's Desire* than in *The Countess Cathleen*, poetry is obtrusive in both plays. When the characters speak extended passages of verse they belong as obviously to an artificial convention as a *prima donna* who persistently takes the centre of the stage. An effect of suspension is created—a hiatus, as it were, in both action and character—as in Cathleen's reply in the following passage:

ALEEL

This house

You are to leave with some old trusty man . . .

CATHLEEN

He bids me go

Where none of mortal creatures but the swan

¹ See *post*, p. 115.

Dabbles, and there you would pluck the harp, when the trees
 Had made a heavy shadow about our door,
 And talk among the rustling of the reeds,
 When night hunted the foolish sun away
 With stillness and pale tapers. No—no—no!
 I cannot.¹

Yeats was, in the beginning, essentially a romantic lyrical poet, and he did not move with ease in the dramatic form. Every playwright has, of necessity, to use artificial conventions; but a true dramatist uses these conventions so skilfully that the audience is not conscious of assisting at an artificial display: the illusion is complete.

In 1903 two new names appeared in the Irish National Theatre Society's list of authors: Lady Gregory and J. M. Synge.

John Millington Synge (1871-1909) was born near Dublin, of a family of landowners. He graduated at Trinity College, Dublin, afterwards wandering through France, Germany, and Italy for several years, separated from Irish life and interests until W. B. Yeats met him in Paris in 1899 and advised him to get away from the Continent altogether and go back to Ireland to live among the peasants on the Aran Islands in Galway Bay. Synge took this advice, dwelling as a peasant among peasants, steeping himself in their language, storing his mind with their tales, and observing closely their customs and character, before writing those plays which some critics have ranked as second only to Shakespeare's.

The great merit of Synge's plays is at the same time their chief fault. His material is reduced to the utmost degree of concentration, until his humour becomes biting grim and sardonic, and his tragedy bitter pain. He rarely admits a superfluous word; indeed he uses the pruning-knife too ruthlessly. Some part of Shakespeare's greatness lies in his generous superfluity—corresponding with the superabundance of life itself. Synge's plays never quite

¹ *The Countess Cathleen*, Sc. III.

'live' outside the mind, because he failed to recognize that there is a point beyond which the virtue of economy passes into the fault of deficiency.

Riders to the Sea (1904) is one of the few twentieth-century examples of true tragedy, and it comes short of being a great tragedy only by being excessively harrowing and ruthless. Jack B. Yeats said that Synge's plays were 'poetry in unlimited sadness'. There is austere beauty in the unlimited sadness of old Maurya (in this play) who loses all her men-folk one by one. But the beauty fades out, and only the shadow of death remains as the curtain falls upon Maurya kneeling by the body of the last of her sons. Yet, though *Riders to the Sea* presents Life as all darkness and winter, it is the true winter of Life, not merely a gloomy artificial obscuring of the light which some writers of near-tragedy mistake for the authentic darkness of Nature.

Synge's bleak comedy *The Shadow of the Glen* aroused much protest when it was first produced in Dublin in 1903. It was a tradition among Nationalists that Irish women were more virtuous than English women. When Synge made Nora Burke unfaithful to her husband it was felt that he was maligning Ireland, and there was uproar in the theatre. These demonstrations, however, were a storm in a teacup compared with the tornado that fell upon the Abbey Theatre when Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* was first acted at the beginning of 1907. Each night for a week the performances were violently interrupted, but the players stood firm, and this became the most popular of Synge's plays. An old man in the Aran Islands told Synge a story which began: 'If any gentleman has done a crime we'll hide him. There was a gentleman that killed his father, and I had him in my house for six weeks till he got away to America.' *The Playboy of the Western World* was based upon that story, and it was the suggestion that Irishmen were capable of glorifying a murderer which provoked the riots. *The Playboy* gives an impressive representation of Irish peasant life and character, and is full of

'striking and beautiful phrases' heard by the author on the roads from Kerry to Mayo or among beggar-women and ballad-singers around Dublin. What Synge desired in drama (he wrote in the preface to *The Playboy*) were reality and joy, and speeches 'as fully flavoured as a nut or apple'. He felt that in Ireland

. . . for a few years more, we have a popular imagination that is fiery and magnificent and tender; so that those of us who wish to write, start with a chance that is not given to writers in places where the spring-time of the local life has been forgotten, and the harvest is a memory only, and the straw has been turned into bricks.

Deirdre of the Sorrows, left uncompleted, was Synge's only departure from the treatment of modern themes; but he worked upon the legendary story of Deirdre in his austere way, and endowed it with the gaunt granite-like beauty that is characteristic of most of his work.

Lady Gregory (1852-1932) experimented extensively in her dramatic works, which ranged from Irish historical plays to translations of Molière into Irish dialect. In addition, she did much to preserve the folk-lore of her country. Her best-known pieces are the *Seven Short Plays* (1909). Her characters are more genially human than those of Synge; and she approached nearer than Synge himself ever did to the joy of which he speaks in the introduction to *The Playboy*. Though her dialogue may not be so remarkable as Synge's it has a sweet savour that is all its own, and there is no 'baldness' about the language of her peasants.

Yeats, Synge, and Lady Gregory were the leading figures of the older generation of dramatists in the modern Irish theatre. In the younger generation three names again stood out: St. John Ervine, Lennox Robinson, and Sean O'Casey.

As a vigorous and controversy-loving dramatic critic, St. John Ervine in the *Observer* enlivened many a dull Sunday for commercial theatre managers whose standard enraged him, and did much useful service for the theatre

by those journalistic writings. Like Lennox Robinson, he was, for a time, manager of the Abbey Theatre, and his two Irish domestic tragedies, *Mixed Marriage* (1911) and *John Ferguson* (1915), had fair success, particularly in America. Both these plays, powerful and moving, contain excellent examples of character-drawing, though a strain of hopelessness runs through their picture of the invincible and devastating stubbornness of men in the grip of religious and political 'convictions'. St. John Ervine afterwards had a notable run of success in the commercial theatres of London and elsewhere with such competent and agreeable comedies as *The First Mrs. Fraser* (1929), *Anthony and Anna* (1925), and *Robert's Wife* (1937). He was by now an exponent of the settled views of middle age, opposing its stable standards of conduct to the raw enthusiasms and predatory instincts of the young. The clash was always entertaining and the issue gratifying to middle age; it might have carried more conviction if it had been made clearer that Youth, even when most self-seeking, has a point of view that should in fairness be ably and fully expressed in any play in which Youth is a protagonist.

Lennox Robinson dealt impressively in *The Lost Leader* (1919) with the legend that Parnell did not die at the time his death was announced, but lived in hiding for some time longer. *The Whiteheaded Boy* (1920), an extremely laughable comedy, contains a gallery of human portraits that are not the less delightful because they verge upon caricature. In later experimental plays, such as *The Round Table* (1924), Lennox Robinson seemed inclined to lose himself in a metaphysical mist.

When W. B. Yeats began his work for the Irish National Theatre, he proposed to found the new drama upon ancient Irish folk-lore. He wanted the new literature to be undated; or, when it was dated at all, to be set in a remote period, as in the vaguely indicated age of his own *Countess Cathleen*. The actual course of literary history in Ireland since 1900, however, has been away from folk-story, and

towards the peasant life and town life of modern times. So far, the most remarkable of the 'town' dramatists is Sean O'Casey, whose *Juno and the Paycock* (1925) at once caused him to be acclaimed as a great dramatist. Brought up in the Dublin tenements which serve as a setting for his plays, he found ripe comedy as well as intense tragedy in those grim slum dwellings. Out of the recent history of Ireland O'Casey endeavoured, with success, to create tragi-comedy on the grand scale; and considering the intense partisan passions aroused by the Easter Rebellion of 1916 and the subsequent Civil War, his objectivity is astonishing. The promise shown in O'Casey's early work was sufficient to place him, with Synge, at the head of the Abbey Theatre dramatists. His faults were those of undisciplined power and exuberance, rather than of inadequacy. *Juno and the Paycock* might have been a better play than it is if the comic material in the first half had been kept under firmer control: the plunge into overwhelming tragic intensity after the appearance of Mrs. Tancred near the end of the second act is too sharp a transition. In *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) there is again a disturbing juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy, but the proportions are more skilfully kept. What inward disturbance an audience may feel on account of the close and incongruous relationship between comedy and tragedy in the later play, is a disturbance due rather to life itself than to the dramatist. Sean O'Casey's first plays were much more than tragedies of the individual person or of particular groups of persons; they suggest, in symbolic form, the tragedy of Ireland itself, where heroism and cupidity, idealism and vainglory, vision and vice, beauty and foulness, poetry and profanity were inextricably mingled. The language of these plays is distinguished: though it is the language of the slums, it is full of beauty. The humorous characters are almost Falstaffian in stature, abundantly comic though without the wit and subtlety of Falstaff; and the portraits of women are, in general, extremely well drawn.

There appeared to be few qualifications, necessary to a fine dramatist, that Sean O'Casey did not possess, and it seemed, in principle, all to the good when he was found to be reaching out to a different kind of play in *The Silver Tassie* (1928) and *Within the Gates* (1933). These were received as masterpieces by those to whom propaganda is the breath of life, though to others they seemed inferior as plays. O'Casey was here flirting with Expressionism, which requires a tendentious and subjective interpretation of the political and social order and the use of symbolic types instead of individual men and women. These requirements, in turn, demand a method of non-realistic (or semi-realistic) presentation upon which the playwright, or the producer, must impose his own mechanistic pattern in place of the less obvious but more rhythmic pattern of life itself. *Within the Gates* is a deeply felt product of the author's social conscience, admirable in intention as an indictment of society, ludicrous in its heavy solemnity, and, in its effect upon the unconverted, hotly null.

§ 5. *The Repertory Movement*

The Irish theatre movement and the repertory theatres in England brought about that decentralization of the drama which became the most important development in English theatrical history since the sixteenth century. From the time of Shakespeare onward, 'English drama' meant, virtually, the plays produced in the London theatres. Dramatists had come to accept the London monopoly as one of the natural conditions of their craft, and grew accustomed to working within the limits imposed by that monopoly. The theatre was a place existing mainly for one of two purposes: (a) the exploitation of the personality of an actor-manager; (b) the provision of financial profit for a commercial manager who 'kept' a theatre as other men might keep a butcher's shop.

The first confident challenge to the London monopoly

came from the Irish theatre in Dublin; but meanwhile, in London itself, there had been the beginnings of revolt. J. T. Grein's *Théâtre Libre* experiment introduced Bernard Shaw as a dramatist, and there were other sporadic efforts of a similar kind in the middle of the 'nineties.

One name stands out from the list of pioneers—that of Miss A. E. F. Horniman, the mother of the twentieth-century English drama. Miss Horniman (a Londoner, born at Forest Hill in 1860) studied art under Professor Legros at the Slade School, and horrified her Victorian parents by interesting herself in woman's suffrage and in theatrical affairs. In 1894 she provided money for a season at the Avenue Theatre, London, which helped forward the Ibsen-Shaw movement. The season was 'a fruitful failure'. Ten years later Miss Horniman put the Abbey Theatre in Dublin firmly on its feet; and in 1907 she established the first modern repertory theatre in Great Britain at the Midland Theatre, Manchester. Next year she took the Gaiety Theatre in Manchester, and for over twelve years 'Miss Horniman's Company' set a standard for the rest of the theatrical world. When she retired in 1921, the Manchester Gaiety fell from grace and became a cinematograph theatre. By that time, however, Miss Horniman's work had had substantial and lasting results elsewhere. Other provincial towns had instituted successful repertory theatres. Sybil Thorndike and Lewis Casson, after doing excellent work at the Manchester Gaiety, helped Miss Lilian Baylis to give London a permanent Shakespeare theatre at the Old Vic in Waterloo Bridge Road; after which, on their own account, they proceeded to popularize Greek tragedy throughout the country in the intervals of much other work.

The repertory movement was not only an attempt to free the theatre from the dictatorship of the financier and the actor-manager; it was also inspired by definite theories of dramatic art. (1) The 'long-run' system was regarded as injurious to both the play and the players, since it led

to a mechanical style of acting that deadened the mind of the player and made him a machine instead of a sensitive instrument; the result being a coarsened interpretation of the play. (2) The repertory system was based upon the team idea. There were no permanent 'stars' among the actors: the Hamlet of one performance might be a second murderer in the next. (3) Under the old system, theatre-managers 'called in' scene-painters, costumiers, composers, lighting experts, and others, to carry out certain separated pieces of work. The repertory system created a corporate art of the theatre—an organic whole, not a casual assemblage of disunited parts. (4) Most important of all for dramatic literature was the fact that repertory directors recognized that a good play might attract only comparatively small audiences. Under former conditions such a play had practically no chance of production, since little, if any, profit could be expected from it. But in the repertory theatres a few performances of a play with a limited appeal were balanced financially by the production of plays of a more popular type.

The most successful repertory experiment in London was that conducted at the Court Theatre from 1904 to 1907 by J. E. Vedrenne and Granville Barker: Vedrenne as the man of affairs, Barker the man of the theatre. During that Court season thirty-two plays (new and old, native and foreign) were staged. The outstanding feature was the unanticipated popularity of Bernard Shaw. Eleven of his plays were produced, and these accounted for 701 performances out of a total of 988 during the season. The Vedrenne-Barker programme included, also, plays by Granville Barker himself (*The Voysey Inheritance*), John Galsworthy (*The Silver Box*), Ibsen, Euripides (in Gilbert Murray's translations), Maeterlinck, John Masefield, St. John Hankin, and others. Much that is best in contemporary drama came from the Court Theatre season.¹

Granville Barker—producer, playwright, and actor

¹ See *The Court Theatre: 1904-7*, by Desmond MacCarthy (1907).

during the Court season—was born in London in 1877, and at the age of thirteen was sent to the Theatre Royal, Margate, at that time a combination of stock company and dramatic school. In 1891 he made his first appearance on the London stage, under Charles Hawtrey, and afterwards acted in Ben Greet's and William Poel's Shakespearian companies. He also appeared in Shaw plays, and served as producer to the Stage Society. By the time he began work at the Court Theatre, therefore, Barker was a fully qualified man of the theatre. In a later venture (at the Savoy, 1912) he produced three Shakespearian plays in an original manner. Though *A Winter's Tale* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* were perhaps unduly strange and fantastic, *Twelfth Night* was a triumph. The costumes and stage setting were new in style, unobtrusive but sufficient. They were a pleasant 'point of rest' for the eyes of the audience, whose minds were left free to take in the sense and enchanting music of Shakespeare's poetry. Though the work of a stage producer cannot be preserved and immortalized, it is not the least of Granville Barker's achievements that he enabled some thousands of his contemporaries to hear, for the first time, Shakespeare as he should be heard. These performances were taken at a pace about one-third faster than had been customary on the modern stage, and the gain was obvious.¹

In later years Granville Barker's appearances in the theatre became rare. For a short time it seemed that he might become the leading dramatist of his generation. *The Marrying of Ann Leete* (1899), his first play, appeared before the influence of the Russian dramatist Tchekhov had reached England, yet it is probably the most Tchekhovian

¹ Granville Barker's lesson on this point will probably be lost, and the loss will be a real misfortune. What has killed Shakespeare for modern audiences is excessive slowness of production. It is as vitally important to preserve the correct *tempo* in a Shakespearian play as in a piece of great music. *Macbeth* played slowly (as Beerbohm Tree, for example, played it) is *Macbeth* murdered in every sense—in poetry, story, and characterization alike.

play in English. The censoring of *Waste* (1907) brought Granville Barker into public notice, but *The Voysey Inheritance* (1905) is his finest achievement. This is one of the best and richest plays of modern times. It lacks the moral and intellectual fervour of Bernard Shaw, but in almost every other respect *The Voysey Inheritance* displays that joy of creation and superabundant vitality lacking from a great deal of contemporary drama. Granville Barker's people in this play are well nourished at the feast of life; by their side, some of Galsworthy's later characters seem like dyspeptic ghosts gathered around a board of funeral baked meats. Galsworthy had, however, what Barker evidently had not—namely, sustained power of creation. Apart from translations (e.g., of Spanish plays by Sierra and the Quintero brothers) Granville Barker wrote only two long plays between 1907 and 1925: *The Madras House* (1911) and *The Secret Life* (1923). In neither of these did he equal *The Voysey Inheritance*, although the first act of *The Madras House* is excellent.

Drama follows the theatre. A debased theatrical system means a debased drama; an enlightened theatre leads to an enlightened drama. What happened in connexion with the Abbey Theatre and the Court Theatre, happened also at the Manchester Gaiety. When Miss Horniman began her venture there in 1908 scarcely any native dramatic material was available. By 1912 there was a 'Manchester school' of dramatists known on two continents. The leading playwrights of the Manchester group were Allan Monkhouse, Harold Brighouse, and Stanley Houghton. More or less by accident the last named came to be regarded as the leader.

Stanley Houghton (born in 1881 at Ashton-upon-Mersey, Cheshire) was a Manchester business man with an active interest in the theatre. Between 1905 and 1912 he wrote dramatic criticism for Manchester newspapers, and in 1908 his one-act play *The Dear Departed* was accepted for Miss Horniman's company. With this and other pieces

he gained a measure of local fame, but in 1912 he found himself suddenly and unexpectedly with a London reputation. Miss Horniman had been invited by the Stage Society to give a performance in London, and she chose *Hindle Wakes* by Stanley Houghton for that occasion. The play, which had not previously been performed, was received with enthusiasm by critics and audiences alike, and Stanley Houghton was 'made'. *Hindle Wakes* was put on for an extended season in London, and managers pursued the author. He wrote three plays¹ for Arthur Bouchier, but his earlier success was not repeated. Tired of being lionized by London people, and discouraged by the failure of his new plays, Houghton went to Paris, where he died a few months later. The virtue of his two best works, *Hindle Wakes* and *The Younger Generation* is in their sincerity and unpretentiousness, and the fidelity with which they portray Lancashire life and character. It is probable that London was attracted by the wrong things in *Hindle Wakes*. Metropolitan audiences detected a piquant flavour of sexual excitement in Fanny Hawthorn's refusal to marry the young man with whom she had enjoyed a week-end excursion at Llandudno. The true dramatic and literary interest lies mainly, however, in the skilful portraits of the old people of the two families. This is true also of *The Younger Generation*, with its terrifying Puritan grandmother whose religious philosophy can be summed up in her own words: "There's original sin in every young man and young woman, and it's got to be stamped out of them. Yes, scourged out of them with whips, and burnt out of them with fire if need be."

Under the repertory theatre system, drama flourished in the English provinces as it had not done since the days of the medieval craft guilds and their cycles of religious plays—with numerous successful dramatic enterprises in the larger towns, and amateur groups are working with skill and enthusiasm all over the country in villages,

¹ *Fhipps; Pearls; Trust the People.*

towns and cities—in Scotland and Wales as well as in England.

After Dublin and Manchester, Birmingham produced a repertory dramatist of wide repute. John Drinkwater (1882–1937) was already an acknowledged poet, before (in 1918) his *Abraham Lincoln* was produced. This play, with its idealistic central figure and noble aspirations, came as a tonic to many people distressed by the war of 1914–18 and its brutalities, its threats of reprisals and counter-reprisals. Written at any other time its success with the public might have been no greater than that of Drinkwater's later historical plays (*Cromwell*, *Mary Stuart*, and *Robert E. Lee*). It is, however, a more impressive play than these: a skilful adaptation of biography and history to the conditions of the modern theatre. It is impressive without pretentiousness or grandiloquence; and by the careful selection and utilization of significant detail,¹ Drinkwater created a convincing and admirable personality.

By attracting large audiences for a long period, *Abraham Lincoln* demonstrated that the spoken word (without rhodomontade and without the aid of extravagant action) can be made to appeal to a large popular audience. That was a point worth demonstrating in a time (before broadcasting) when the silent film was threatening the spoken drama. *Abraham Lincoln* went far also towards fulfilling a prophecy made by John Galsworthy nearly ten years previously. Writing in 1909 he suggested that the renaissance English drama would, in the coming years, travel in two main channels, one of them bearing 'new barques of poetry, shaped, it may be, like prose . . . a poetic prose-drama, emotionalizing us by its diversity and purity of form and invention, and whose province will be to disclose the elemental soul of man and the forces of Nature, not perhaps as the old tragedies disclosed them, not necessarily

¹ As (for example) the passage about Lincoln's disreputable hat in Scene 1.

in the epic mood, but always with beauty and in the spirit of discovery'.¹ The plane of exaltation required in poetic drama is reached more frequently in the prose passages of *Abraham Lincoln* than in the blank verse of Stephen Phillips. Yet, for the time being, *Abraham Lincoln* was to remain a solitary pointer, and when a general stirring of interest in poetic drama came about it was on the very different model of Auden and Isherwood and their circle.²

§ 6. J. M. Barrie

The modern drama of ideas—rooted in England by Bernard Shaw and cultivated by Galsworthy, Granville Barker and others—had practically no influence upon J. M. Barrie (1860–1937). Like many of his contemporaries he found little that was admirable in twentieth-century standards of life and conduct, but he did not feel called upon to enlist as a fighter in 'the liberative war of humanity'. His was not the temperament of a crusading Bernard Shaw who could with enjoyment raise his ethical battle-axe and split the skulls of fools and rogues. Barrie's only weapons were a faint disarming smile and a dreamy eye. He looked around the world and saw the men and women God had made. He did not agree that they were 'very good'. On the contrary: he believed he could do much better himself. He went indoors, put his feet on the fender, and began to create a world of his own, peopled with men and women made to his own pattern. There are no standards of literary judgment applicable to Barrie. It is possible to write, either, that his world is more delightful than the real world, or that his world is unpleasantly sweet and sickly. And since it needs only very small space to write either of those things, fewer books have been written upon Barrie than upon other leading authors of the day. His plots are preposterous (e.g., *Quality Street* and

¹ *Some Platitudes Concerning Drama* (*The Inn of Tranquillity*).

² See pp. 137–8 and 201, *post*.

Alice Sit-by-the-Fire); his characters incredible (e.g., Valentine Brown and Phoebe Throssel, Matey and Lob, Richardson, Tweeny, Mary Rose); his dialogue sometimes as creaky as a rusty machine. Yet after all the critical tomahawks had been used upon him Barrie continued to smile his disarming smile. As a dramatist he did nearly all the wrong things. Blithe as Pantaloon, he hit his audiences upon their heads and rode in triumph through their hearts for many years. He does not fit in anywhere among early twentieth-century writers. Uninfluenced by any, influencing none,¹ it might be said that he is altogether without significance. But because he is not in the main stream of tendency, because he is 'not of an age', he may impress posterity more than he impressed the sour-faced among his own generation.

Like Bernard Shaw, James Matthew Barrie came from foreign parts to conquer London. Born at Kirriemuir (the Thrums of his novels) in 1860, he was educated at the village school, Dumfries Academy, and Edinburgh University, where he graduated in 1882. His early days as a journalist (first in Nottingham and afterwards in London) are described under a thin veil of fiction in *When a Man's Single* (1888), a book which has many touches of Barrie's individual humour. Between that time and 1900 he wrote several novels and collections of sketches, as well as a charming biography of his mother (*Margaret Ogilvie*, 1896). He had practically no 'public life', yet high official distinctions fell upon him: a baronetcy in 1913; the Order of Merit in 1922; the Rectorship of St. Andrew's University also in 1922.²

At the end of the nineteenth century Barrie had a large following as a novelist. He had made a few experiments

¹ Though as a novelist in the nineteenth century he led the Kailyard School (a group of writers who dealt with Scottish peasant life) he did not exercise particular 'influence' upon dramatists, except possibly upon A. A. Milne, who has, however, protested against the tendency to regard him as steeped in the Barriquesque.

² His Rectorial Address, *Courage*, is a typical piece of Barrieism.

in play-writing, but with no marked success. A quarter of a century later, however, when his novels were out of fashion, he had become probably the most popular dramatist then living.

His experimental plays (*The Professor's Love Story*, 1895; *The Little Minister*, 1897; *The Wedding Guest*, 1900) show Barrie endeavouring to fit himself to accepted stage conventions, before he began to write in a more personal manner. *Quality Street* (1901) has the atmosphere of *Cranford*. Set in the Napoleonic period, its maiden ladies are 'old' (according to the judgment of the time) almost before they are past girlhood, and the pathos of the piece comes from the barbarity of a generation which put its women 'on the shelf' if they did not marry in the earliest twenties or before. The 'lavendered' atmosphere of *Quality Street* is robbed of a good deal of pleasantness by that suggestion of yellowing and slow decay which hangs about its dimity souls.

Social reformers in need of a tract might turn *The Admirable Crichton* (1903) to their own uses. It is a powerful argument for the claims of God's nobleman as against the 'rights' of those who are merely noblemen of the United Kingdom; and its message is in no way weakened by the probability that it was not intended to convey a message. It is rarely possible to apply the usual vocabulary of criticism to Barrie. Though this play has several well-rounded and finished characters, it would be rash to say that any one of them is 'probable.' The illusion of life-likeness given by Barrie to his characters comes, not from their conformity to the human model, but from the fact that they are consistent with Barrie's own imaginative world. In a world of phantasy normal human beings are 'out of the picture'. If it is agreed to swallow the camel which is Barrie's universe, it is absurd to strain at the gnats which are his characters. All that can be asked is that the people within the author's created universe shall look as though they belong there.

The cleavage between the actual world and the Barrie world of phantasy does not, however, disable his plays from providing a critical commentary upon life. To Barrie, one of the most interesting spectacles in the two worlds—his own and this—was the familiar tragi-comic contest between man and woman. In the Meredithian sense Barrie was one of 'the pick of men'.¹ He had womanly insight, and a wish to see life and mankind from the woman's point of view. He was the male egoist's least flattering friend, and would not pretend to believe that the world is kept on its way by strong, self-reliant males. He drew at least two portraits of such strong, self-reliant men: John Shand (*What Every Woman Knows*, 1908), and Harry Sims (*The Twelve Pound Look*, 1913)—and their actual strength is no more than that of over-blown airballs.

The Twelve Pound Look is possibly the best one-act comedy yet written. Barrie was a friend and admirer of George Meredith and in this play he observed several of the principles laid down in Meredith's famous *Essay on Comedy*. Except that it has not the rapier-thrusts of wit that Meredith desiderated for ideal comedy, *The Twelve Pound Look* might usefully be appended to the *Essay* as an illustration of the working of the Comic Spirit. Harry Sims, though pompous and ridiculous, is presented without contempt, as Meredith insisted that a truly comic figure should be. Shand and Sims give glimpses of the universal egoist, even as Meredith's Willoughby Patterne gives a glimpse from a different angle. Sir Willoughby is more rarefied and intellectualized than Barrie's two men, and the latter are consequently closer to average humanity, and more useful as corrective agents of male egoism. Barrie, though himself a 'glorious, dazzling success', pleaded through Kate in *The Twelve Pound Look* for the 'poor souls' who had not 'got on' and who therefore retained those

¹ 'You meet, now and then, men who have the woman in them without being womanized; they are the pick of men.'—George Meredith: *The Tragic Comedians*.

humane feelings often endangered by the worship of success and efficiency.

In two of his later plays, *Dear Brutus* (1917) and *Mary Rose* (1920), Barrie went further from the world of reality; away to Lob's enchanted Wood of the Second Chance, and Mary's Island that Likes to be Visited. There was always something of the emotional trapeze artiste about Barrie. He seemed often to be poised above a large bath of warm tears, and unemotional spectators caught their breath for fear he should tumble in and drown. He avoided that discomfort most skilfully, but the strain of fearful anticipation was trying for the audience. Both *Dear Brutus* and *Mary Rose* impose some such strain, but, here again, it is the laws of the Barrie universe that apply, not the laws of earth.

It is easy to give judgment that Barrie either is or is not a great dramatist. But whatever verdict be given, the judge may be tormented by a subconscious conviction that the conclusion is wrong. Moreover, Tuesday's judgment does not always correspond with Monday's. Purdie in *Dear Brutus* says: 'I feel that there is something in me that will make me go on being the same ass, however many chances I get.' Something inexplicable in Barrie often made a critic feel a different kind of ass at each chance he got.

Barrie's last play, *The Boy David* (1936), was a comparative failure in the theatre. This may have been because it departed from the customary Barrie manner, but more probably it was a sign that the author had outlived his own audience. Though his greatest success *Peter Pan* (1904) was still a valuable property at the time he died, its hearty juvenilism was wearing thin, and fairies were heading for cold storage. Barrie was stigmatized as an escapist and as a propagator of infantilism. Neither charge was wholly unjustified, but both were counterbalanced by the good that was in him, by the joy he had given to countless children and adults, by his contribution to human understanding, and by his skill in a chosen craft.

§ 7. *The Theatre Between Wars*

In the years before the war of 1914-18, it had been assumed that the English theatre was at the beginning of an epoch of activity unequalled since the decline of Elizabethan drama. With some half-dozen men of letters writing for the London stage, and with a chain of repertory theatres outside London, this spirit of optimism seemed well founded. But the catastrophe of war brought a radical change. The audience for what may be called the intellectual drama had never been large, and the necessities of national service seriously diminished the number of theatre-goers. At the same time, the stress and strain of warfare increased the demand for light (even frivolous) entertainment—revue, musical comedy, and farce. Theatre rents and production costs rose ruinously; and by the end of the war a number of the London playhouses had become little more than expensive toys for millionaires, some of whom were without even elementary knowledge of theatrecraft or dramatic literature. Under these new conditions even Bernard Shaw was unable, for a long time, to get *Heart-break House* produced in England. Masterpieces were at a discount.

Future historians considering English drama of the decade following the armistice of 1918, will need to take account of the economic conditions then governing the London and provincial theatres, and hampering the dramatists who wrote for them. Serious plays had little chance of production unless they were written for a small cast; while expenses of mounting had also to be reduced to a minimum by avoidance of scenic changes.¹ The 'unitics' came into their own again, because it was cheaper to observe than to ignore them.

¹ Such economies were imposed only upon 'straight' plays. Musical comedies and revues became more garish and expensive than before. Some of these spectacles led to the bankruptcy court, but there was apparently an endless line of footlight-dazzled financiers to fill the gaps.

The moribund condition of the commercial theatres was the less regrettable, since interest in the better kind of play was kept alive by the remarkable increase of amateur companies and small repertory theatres. About this time, social and educational institutions (both voluntary and State-aided) increased rapidly in number, and play-production formed part of the cultural work in hundreds of local centres. The establishment of the British Drama League in 1919 did much to foster and co-ordinate such activities. Though the amateur movement is outside the scope of a brief literary survey of the period, it should not be overlooked that members of village companies (and of similar organizations elsewhere) were writing, as well as producing, plays. The trend of English drama was influenced as much by these unnamed dramatists as by professional playwrights.

The conditions ruling in the commercial theatres after 1918 did result in the virtual exclusion from the public stage of at least one dramatist who seemed important before the war. Critical opinion had been divided as to the merit of *The Tragedy of Nan* (1909) by John Masefield, but at the lowest estimate it was a work of much promise, and one of the few twentieth-century plays that approximate to true tragedy. This and one or two other plays by Masefield had been performed with moderate success, but after the war (apart from a few experimental performances in London) Masefield's new plays got little farther than the private theatre in his home at Boar's Hill, near Oxford. In *Good Friday* (1916) and *The Trial of Jesus* (1925), alternative versions of the same Gospel incidents, John Masefield cramped himself by endeavouring to keep close to the scriptural record. Unless an author accepts the artistic necessity of breaking away from a slavish imitation of the original narrative, a play dealing with the life of Christ can hardly escape seeming a weak paraphrase of biblical English. There is some dramatic and psychological interest in Masefield's treatment of Herod, Pilate, and

Pilate's wife, but no play can overcome the handicap of a static central figure. Moreover, while the consistent artlessness of medieval dramatists enabled them to handle religious themes unpretentiously, the occasional 'artless' simplicity of Masfield's verse seems only a studied and irritatingly self-conscious trick.

John Masfield's ability as a playwright up to 1925 must be judged by *The Tragedy of Nan*. A comparison of performances by two professional companies of equal standing in 1913 indicated that *The Tragedy of Nan* required exceptionally sensitive interpretation by every actor, and that in the absence of this the dramatist's characters have little individual force of their own. Masfield does not help his actors; he gives them 'voices', which they must clothe in convincing personalities. The vindictiveness of Mrs. Pargetter, the fluctuating loves of Dick, the innocence and despair of Nan, Pargetter's frenzy of grief over his broken toby jug, the poetic mutterings of old Gaffer Pearce: all these are speciously effective on the printed page, but they do not easily bear transportation to the stage. Here again John Masfield is betrayed by his desire to avoid artificiality, and to keep close to the great simplicities—love, hate, justice, death. A dramatist, however, should do more than is done in *The Tragedy of Nan* to vivify inert simplicities before asking an actor to realize them in action. Though no play can be fully alive until it is seen on the stage, a good play nevertheless has life in itself before ever it reaches the theatre. Masfield's later secular plays added little to his reputation as a dramatist. *Melloney Holtspur* (1922) is probably the most notable of these.

A far richer sense of character was shown in Arnold Bennett's plays. The three acts of *Milestones* (1912) cover three generations (1860–1885–1912), knit together in the play by the unifying idea of the stubborn prejudice with which each successive generation meets the spirit of progress and change: in 1860, Sam Sibley opposes iron ships; in 1885, John Rhoad, who had been a pioneer in constructing

iron ships, is contemptuous of the project for steel ships. That historical sense which served Arnold Bennett well in his novels for building up the panoramic 'time-background', enabled him in *Milestones* to reproduce the tone and colour of the mid-Victorian and late-Victorian periods. The characters are well drawn, with subtle shades of humour and gravity, as the leading figures pass under the moulding hand of Time. *Milestones* (in which Edward Knoblock collaborated) is a solid and brilliant achievement. Nothing else among Bennett's works as a playwright (either alone or in collaboration) touched the *Milestones* level, though mention must be made of his two first-rate comedies, *The Great Adventure* (1913—a dramatized adaptation of the excellent comic novel, *Buried Alive*) and *What the Public Wants* (1909). In both these plays he commented with gentle satire upon modern matters; and, in both, the character-creation is admirable.

One of the most interesting occasions in the London theatre in the early nineteen-twenties was on March 14, 1921, when Clemence Dane's *A Bill of Divorcement* had its first performance. The authoress had previously made her mark as a novelist with *Regiment of Women* (1917), a ruthless analysis of peculiarly horrible and cruel egoism. *A Bill of Divorcement* is, in some respects, of the Pinero type: 'well made' and with a carefully engineered 'great scene'. But there the resemblance ends. Unlike most of Pinero's, Clemence Dane's play faced a real human problem; and her people behave less like stage automata. Yet it cannot be claimed that the characters are altogether exempt from being crippled by the dramatist to fit the exigencies of the situation she contrived. The weakness of the scene between Sydney and Kit in the last act may be due to the necessity of getting Sydney flung emotionally high and dry. If that is so, it is the management of plot that is at fault. But, on the other hand, Kit's caddishness and imbecility may be due to the fact (shown in several of her stories and plays) that Clemence Dane is weak in portraying men. For its

freshness and sincerity, however, and for its combination of clever stagecraft and serious purpose, *A Bill of Divorcement* was a remarkable beginning for a young dramatist. In her next play, *Will Shakespeare* (1921), cumbersome dramatic machinery¹ and a dismally unpleasant Shakespeare were too heavy a handicap. If Shakespeare, or any other genius of the first rank is to be brought upon the stage, some sign must be given of the genius of the original. Clemence Dane failed to give any such sign—as, presumably, any one but Shakespeare himself must always fail.

Clemence Dane's subsequent plays (e.g., *Naboth's Vineyard*, 1925; *Granite*, 1926; *Mariners*, 1927) were less outstandingly interesting, until the appearance of *Adam's Opera* (1928), 'an attempt to translate into terms of the theatre an impression of the period which directly succeeded that awakening which we call "the war". . . . The impression produced upon such members of the general public as are articulate or semi-articulate, is the impression which seems to me most worth studying.'² To put the 'mass-mind and its contradictory impressions' on to the stage is so desirable an extension of the range of drama that Clemence Dane's failure to 'bring off' this experiment matters little in comparison with the importance of the experiment itself. The mass-mind—articulate, semi-articulate, and inarticulate—is a preponderating factor in twentieth-century life, and its exploration is a necessary service. Clemence Dane's fairy-tale and nursery-rhyme machinery in *Adam's Opera*, if not immediately explicable, is nevertheless a possible vehicle for the simple symbolism required for such a theme. The impressiveness of the play comes from Clemence Dane's having had something important to transmit; she has not succeeded in transmitting it lucidly, but there is no deliberate freakishness. The mass-mind is a parade of phantasms, and a phantasmic method alone can display it. The text of *Adam's Opera*

¹ See, for example, the 'shadows' in Act I.

² Preface to *Adam's Opera*.

should be studied in relation to the preface by those who wish to observe the fluxions, the cross-currents, and the drifting of thought and feeling in the nineteen-twenties.

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In drama, as in fiction and travel-writing, Somerset Maugham stands high among contemporary authors. He resembled, at first, the Society dramatists of the eighteen-nineties, combining the technical methods of Pinero with the verbal mannerisms of Oscar Wilde. His plays (from *A Man of Honour*, 1903, to *Our Betters*, 1923) reflect the changes in taste among playgoers who liked to see on the stage an imitation of the 'high life' of their own day. Whether or not the dregs of Society actually spoke as they are made to speak in some of Somerset Maugham's plays matters little, but a student of modern drama will find it interesting to compare the stage idioms of 1907 with those of 1923. Lady Frederick (1907), a typically tiresome woman-with-a-past, remarks: 'I've done a lot of foolish things in my time, but, my God, I have suffered.' That voice is the voice of all the women-with-a-past who walked sinuously through late-Victorian and Edwardian stage-plays. And when Dick Lomas says (*The Explorer*, 1908): 'Half the women I know merely married their husbands to spite somebody else. It appears to be one of the commonest forms of matrimony', Somerset Maugham has bridged the twenty-five years between Oscar Wilde and Noel Coward. Free on the one hand from Victorian ready-made morality, and on the other hand from neo-Georgian licentiousness and cynicism, *Caesar's Wife* (1919) is among Maugham's best plays; while *The Circle* (1921) and *Our Betters* (1923) have been much praised for their careful craftsmanship and acute social criticism; the latter has, in fact, been ranked as the best comedy of its kind since Restoration times. *The Breadwinner* (1930), a sparkling and soundly sensible play, brings the wheel full circle from

Ibsen, for, reversing *A Doll's House*, it shows a husband revolting from the bondage of a happy home and family and going out 'to lead his own life'. *The Breadwinner* presents not only the long-overdue revolt of the male, but also the revolt of Middle Age against Youth, and in this particular Somerset Maugham is more convincing as well as wittier than St. John Ervine. To the collected edition of his plays Somerset Maugham contributed informative prefaces regarding his own progress as a dramatist, and described how the restrictiveness of the theatre led him at length to abandon the writing of stage-plays. But before he did so he delivered himself of two pieces—*For Services Rendered* (1932) and *Sheppey* (1933)—deeply felt and deeply serious in intention. Neither was on the level of his best work, however, for his effectiveness as a critic of life is in inverse proportion to his solemnity. Through wit, humour, gaiety, and an incisive illusion-proof mind, he was capable of more in the way of the correction of absurdities and abuses than when he permitted a deliberate seriousness to dull his natural gifts.

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Bernard Shaw once said: 'I hate to see dead people walking about.' Noel Coward's plays must surely have infuriated G. B. S., for they are full of galvanized corpses—talking and making the motions of living creatures, but corpses all the same, mere shells of men and women. Though for a while Noel Coward seemed to take a cynical delight in his parade of 'hags who've never surrendered to Anno Domini',¹ he was as conscious a moralist as those medieval writers who paraded the Seven Deadly Sins. Yet, in the manner of his day, he snapped his fingers in the faces of the moralists and tweaked their noses in derision.² The immediate popularity of his plays was due

¹ *Lady Frederick*, by Somerset Maugham.

² See 'The Author's Reply to his Critics': *Three Plays*, by Noel Coward (1925).

to the 'smartness' of the dialogue (an echo of the conversation that many listeners liked to imagine themselves conducting all day and every day) and to the opportunity that these plays gave for the vicarious satisfaction of anti-social impulses. Until he wrote the first-rate comedy, *Hay Fever* (1925), his plays were mainly significant as a symptom of the deadly amorality of a small section of the community—the cocktail and dance-obsessed section. The febrile brightness of the typical Noel Coward play—e.g., *Fallen Angels* (1925), *Private Lives* (1930), *Design for Living* (1933)—was the author's indictment of the type of person that both fascinated and repelled him, as, in a less intelligent way, Marie Corelli had been fascinated and repelled a generation before. Both these writers, lacking a metaphysic, could react to vice only through their emotions and could do no more than lodge a protest. The contemplation of vice as a factor in human life demanding a reasoned corrective was beyond their powers. Where Marie Corelli was sentimental, Noel Coward was cynical, which, as Wilde informed us, is merely the sentimental inverted. When he attempted to deal with a wholly serious theme in a directly serious manner, *Post Mortem* (1931), Noel Coward's insufficiency became plainly evident. Bitterness and passionate indignation are not enough to carry this play (which postulates one of the war-dead returning unwelcomed even by those who had most bemoaned his death). The theme requires more mental control and a better sense of balance and order than were devoted to it. But apart from *Post Mortem*, Noel Coward's flair for 'good theatre' has rarely been equalled. Material that is altogether negligible in print may sometimes be almost irresistibly compelling when spoken or sung on the stage in the highly charged mass-atmosphere of the playhouse: *Bitter Sweet* (1929) and *Cavalcade* (1931) bear witness to this fact; many might despise them, but few could resist them. Even though he reached the zone of Mayfair and Monte Carlo, Noel Coward retained much of the spirit of the

London gamin who is sometimes witty, sometimes wittily and enjoyably vulgar, sometimes merely vulgar. In the sequence of short pieces collectively named *To-night at 8.30* (1936), *Red Peppers* illustrates this in its ranging from grand robust humour to moments of nastiness. In the same collection, *Fumed Oak* is a crude Cowardesque compression of the idea also used in Somerset Maugham's *The Breadwinner*.¹

After the huge popular success of *The Good Companions*, J. B. Priestley's interest in novel-writing was submerged by the attractions of the theatre, in which his career as a dramatist began with *Dangerous Corner* (1932), an exceptionally neat and ingenious piece of play-making. A chance remark by one of the characters soon after the rise of the curtain plunges a happy group of people into a distressful series of discoveries concerning their inter-relationships in the immediate past and their happiness is ruined. At the moment when the play appears to have ended thus in disaster, a momentary black-out is followed by a return to the opening situation and dialogue. The conversation flows along an almost identical channel, but this time the chance remark passes unheeded; the dangerous corner has been safely negotiated, and the curtain falls finally on an assurance that the characters have this time avoided catastrophe. The play never loses grip, notwithstanding the author's inclination (shown again in *Time and the Conways*) to rain too many blows upon his people, and it is a superb example of dramatic craftsmanship. *Laburnum Grove* (1933) and *Eden End* (1934)—the first dealing with a crook who lived as a respectable suburban householder, the other a study of character in a Yorkshire setting—maintained Priestley's popularity as a playwright, but *Cornelius* (1935) had fewer admirers, though its aim was more ambitious. It set out to show the effect upon those concerned of a business in decline (a topical subject in view of the prolonged contemporary trade depression then overshadowing many lives), but the office atmosphere

¹ See p. 131, *ante*.

and the principal character, Cornelius himself, became mutually destructive on the stage by dividing the interest of the audience. And, further, the author's skill was insufficient to suggest the deadly time-drag which is the most harrowing part of the experience of those caught up in an enterprise drifting towards inevitable failure. Everything in *Cornelius* happens too swiftly: the reduction of the time-scale necessary in a stage play is not adequately compensated, as it can be by a just use of dramatic illusion. With *Time and the Conways* (1937) J. B. Priestley may be said to have begun a new phase—a phase in which, though still announcing his belief that theatre audiences have the right to be entertained, he became more inclined to use the stage as a platform for the expression of ideas. *Cornelius* had been a signpost pointing in that direction. Though *Time and the Conways* was acclaimed by the critics as a highly original masterpiece, the time-theme fumblingly handled there by Priestley had already been treated with moving beauty and a closer approach to profundity in *Berkeley Square* (1928) by J. C. Squire and J. L. Balderston, working on an idea suggested by Henry James's uncompleted story *A Sense of the Past* (published posthumously in 1916). Ideas are the most exciting of adult playthings, but they hardly are so in J. B. Priestley's hands. He was compelled to over-simplify the new conceptions of time in *Time and the Conways* and to imply an easier interpretation of J. W. Dunne's theories¹ than is warrantable. Except when a dramatist is also a great poet, able as Shakespeare was to absorb and transcend philosophy in and through poetry, the theatre is a ramshackle place for the expression of philosophical concepts. Moreover, the value of a play (or of any other work of the creative imagination) is not in proportion to the seriousness or solemnity of its author's intention. An excellent farce may merit higher marks than an indifferent morality play. The contrary view is a heresy

¹ See *An Experiment with Time* (1927), *The Serial Universe* (1938), and *The New Immortality* (1938) by J. W. Dunne.

that obtained wide currency in the nineteen-thirties, and among its by-products was the scolding delivered by J. B. Priestley in the explanatory epilogue to the printed text of his *Johnson Over Jordan* (1939), which suffered on the stage from over-elaboration and pretentiousness. This play, using (consciously or not) the mode of Expressionism, depicts an ordinary man re-experiencing phantasmally after death the main phases of his mortal life. If, instead of employing all the resources of modern stage production the author had trusted in simplicity of presentation, *Johnson Over Jordan* might have ranked as a modern *Everyman*. As it was, the playgoing public was justified in preferring J. B. Priestley's own farcical comedy *When We Are Married* (1938), and his scolding was misdirected. Another of his 'serious' plays, *I Have Been Here Before* (1937), though principally a study in the healing of a psychically sick man, utilized the idea of recurrence and intervention (*vide* Ouspensky's *A New Model of the Universe*, 1931).

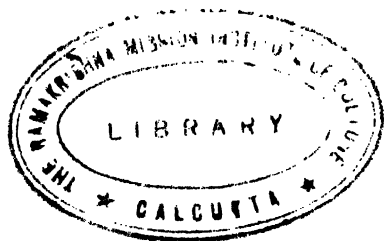
Potentially at least, the most important dramatist in the theatre in the fourth decade of the present century was James Bridie, a Scottish doctor turned dramatist. Though wayward and erratic, he was a true genius astray amidst the merely talented. Bridie's work has that touch of fire and intellectual passion which is found nowhere else among his contemporaries in prose drama than in Bernard Shaw. That fire in James Bridie's plays compels the acceptance of the incredible as possible, as, e.g., the poisoning scene in *A Sleeping Clergyman* (1933), and it is a more intense fire than is ever found in Shaw. Its presence is evident in the character of Dr. Knox in *The Anatomist* (1931), one of the earliest and most durable of his plays, and at moments in *The King of Nowhere* (1938), a widely disturbing work rendered unsatisfactory by doubt as to the mental state of its central character (a doubt also present, but not injuriously in the dramatic sense, in *Hamlet*). While less cosmically imposing than some other of Bridie's works,

Tobias and the Angel (1931) remained up to 1940 its author's best play. Well constructed, humane, humorous, moving, it commands respect and affection. Old Tobit and his wife, Anna, are drawn with exquisite delicacy; Tobias is the little man who, all through the ages, finds life a trifle too difficult to manage by himself and requires either an angel or a wife to fortify him; the Angel is an impressive figure but is also very good fun; and Sara, Tobias's wife, a likeable minx. When the miasma of dull solemnity lifts from the contemporary theatre, the essential virtue in such a play as *Tobias and the Angel* will be more generally appreciated.

No more than bare reference can be made to the work of Dodie Smith (who began to write her plays under the name C. L. Anthony)—*Autumn Crocus* (1930), *Service* (1932), *Call It a Day* (1935), *Dear Octopus* (1938); Keith Winter—*The Shining Hour* (1934); Ronald Mackenzie—*Musical Chairs* (1932); and Charles Morgan—*The Flashing Stream* (1938).

Interest in religious drama was revived by the institution at Canterbury Cathedral in 1928 of an annual festival of music and drama. Beginning with a presentation of John Masefield's *The Coming of Christ*, the committee in later years commissioned new plays for performance in the Chapter House. The most notable of these, T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), was followed by *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* (1936) by Charles Williams, and Dorothy Sayers's *The Zeal of Thy House* (1937) and *The Devil to Pay* (1939). Though not of the popular type, *Murder in the Cathedral* afterwards had a long run in London theatres and encouraged T. S. Eliot to experiment further with verse-drama in *The Family Reunion* (1939). This latter play transferred the theme of the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus to a modern English country house, and in its verse-style sought to close the gap between poetry and modern conversational prose by a flattened rhythmical speech which fell at times into an arrangement of words

pitifully bald as verse and absurdly stilted as prose. *The Family Reunion* is an instructive example of material deliberately forced into an alien mould, and a showing-up of the fallacy that poetic drama can be determined into existence in an age which has no instinctive inclination towards it. Certain threadbare patches in *Murder in the Cathedral* had been hidden by its ritual vestments and an occasional prosaic harshness covered by religious rhetoric, but in *The Family Reunion* though Eliot the poet had his fine moments it was nakedly plain that drama was not his medium.



CHAPTER IV

POETRY

§ 1. *Survivors and Precursors*

WHEN THE twentieth century opened, Tennyson had been dead nine years, and there was a widespread impression that English poetry had died with him. Alfred Austin, Tennyson's delayed successor as Poet Laureate, was ludicrously inferior; and although two of the greater nineteenth-century poets, Swinburne and Meredith, lived on until 1909, their best poetry appeared before the death of Tennyson. Robert Bridges (1844-1930), the most notable 'active' poet alive in 1901, was then fifty-six. He had written several poetic dramas and many beautiful lyrics, yet he had to wait for years before, on his appointment as Poet Laureate in 1913, he began to receive even partial recognition of his standing as a true poet. Though his poetic dramas are undramatic and involved to the point of obscurity, his lyrics are clear as crystal. A strict sense of form and purity of outline made it impossible for him to admit into his poetry those luscious qualities that might have made him popular between 1876 and 1898, his period of full production. In the time sense he was a Victorian poet; in form and spirit he belonged to the new century. A contemplative and unfevered temper is required for the appreciation of Robert Bridges' poetry. He wrote many love lyrics, but his voice was never lifted in a shout of joy; nor in his elegies did it shrill into complaint. He is always serene: feeling is *contained* in his verse rather than expressed by it. His emotion is 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', and this tranquil air is present in his landscape pieces also. The external features of his nature poetry are in sharp contrast to Wordsworth's descriptions of the wild magnificence of Northern England. Bridges' landscapes are

of the south country, 'bathed in a warm and comfortable glow';¹ and when he contemplates the seas, they are benign seas,

Whereon the timid ships steal out
And laugh to find their foe asleep,
That lately scattered them about,
And drave them to the fold like sheep.²

The retiring genius of Robert Bridges,³ serviceable to him as a poet, disqualified him from popular esteem as Laureate, but if he could ever have been supposed to care what opinion the general public held of him, *The Testament of Beauty* (1929) might be regarded as his exquisite revenge on those who had referred to him as 'the dumb Laureate'. His output was small between 1913 and 1929, but the publication of his philosophical poem of over 4,000 lines was ample compensation for a paucity of ceremonial odes. *The Testament of Beauty* sold more copies, it was said, than had been sold of any poet's work since the time of Byron, and critics wrote that it was the most important addition to English poetry of its type since Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850). Bridges had long been endeavouring, without real success, to naturalize classical metres in English. In some of his later short poems, he believed, the results of experiments with a loose adaptation of the alexandrine (iambic hexameter line) were sufficiently promising to justify a more ambitious attempt. The opportunity came when, long after his eightieth birthday, he was moved to give expression to his reflections upon man and the universe. Granted that meditation on an exalted plane requires verse and not prose, what is needed is a verse-medium combining as much as possible of the non-spectacular ease of prose with the authority of poetry. Bridges' loose alexandrines might be described as free verse controlled by a modulated echo of

¹ *Eros and Psyche: March*, stanza 24.

² *Shorter Poems*: Book I, No. 12.

³ Bridges died in 1930, Masfield succeeding him as Laureate.

metrical authority. There is, in *The Testament of Beauty*, a 'standard' line (say, for example,

We sail a changeful sea through halcyon days and storm)¹

to which every line has an ultimate metrical reference, but the freedom with which that reference is used, and the confident personal skill with which the 'loose alexandrines' are handled, can be seen in any half-dozen lines of *The Testament of Beauty*. If not used with 'conversational ease' they nevertheless are used with such ease of thought as is possible when the thought itself is often a difficult mental wrestling with a wayward and directionless world. Much of Book I (*Introduction*) is a discussion of the limitations of Reason—

this picklock Reason is still a-fumbling at the wards²

—and the poet looked to the growth of a *mature* 'accord of Sense, Instinct, Reason and Spirit'³ (which the Greeks had experienced only in the charming unstable 'grace of childhood') operating through Christ as the WORD OF GOD⁴ to bring mankind to stability and peace. Book II (*Selfhood*) and Book III (*Breed*) treat of 'the two Arch-Instincts of man's nature'. With excessive simplification we might call them (a) the self-Self—the self-protective assertive personality; and (b) the racial-Self—the impulse towards propagation. Both in II and III, however, the digressions and discussions of incidental matters occupy more space than the topics-in-chief. The reference (in the section discussing pleasure in food) to the voluptuary and epicure who

indulgeth richly his time untill the sad day come
when he retireth with stomach Emeritus⁵

is a pleasant touch of fun. Humour of a quieter kind also wrinkles the surface of the lines from time to time. Book

¹ Book I, ll. 3.

² I, 463.

³ I, 708 ff.

⁴ I, 771 ff.

⁵ III, 118-19.

IV, named *Ethick*, mainly a discourse on the 'sense of Duty in man', leads up to the doctrine that

In truth 'spiritual animal' wer a term for man
nearer than 'rational' to define his genus;
Faith being the humanizer of his brutal passions,
the clarifier of folly and medicine of care,
the clue of reality, and the driving motiv
of thatt self-knowledge which teacheth the ethick of life.¹

Though, in his long retirement near Oxford, Bridges was not a man of affairs, his eye was as much on the world about him as upon the ancient philosophers, to whom he looked indeed for the light by which present discontents could be illumined—

See how cross-eyed the pride of our world-wide crusade
against Nigerian slavery, while the London poor
in their Victorian slums lodged closer and filthier
than the outraged alien; and under liberty's name
our Industry is worse fed and shut out from the sun.—
In every age and nation a like confusion is found.²

Bridges died, aged eighty-five, less than six months after *The Testament of Beauty* was published, and in this last poetic utterance he spoke with a voice of serene assurance for the guidance of an age of despair. His poem was not unanimously praised, however, especially when its first imposing effect had ceased to awe, and only a few years afterwards a critic suggested that it should be placed beside such solemn oddities as Erasmus Darwin's *The Loves of the Plants*.

Some of those who demurred at the choice of Bridges as Laureate would have nominated Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), who had at various times produced suitable verse for national occasions. His poems were read even by those to whom poetry was otherwise repellent, and the Empire thrilled to the simple marching measures of Kipling's Boer War anthem, *The Absent-Minded Beggar*. But there were

¹ IV, 1132–37.

² IV, 356–61.

many others who found Kipling's verse intolerable. These were antagonized by his militant imperialism, by his hotch-potch of brutality and sentimentality, by his banjo rhythms, by his addiction to a pseudo-Cockney style of utterance which represented his notion of English soldiers' speech. In the opinion of such critics, Kipling was insensitive, loud, and vulgar. As had happened before and has happened since in the history of literature, political prejudice and æsthetic criticism became confounded, leading many with different party enthusiasms to blind themselves to Kipling's talents as a writer in verse and prose. Throughout his career the shadow of partisan disfavour continued to fall upon him, although as imperialistic fervour died down he ceased to be either a popular idol or an object of detestation. This change was advantageous, for Kipling's prose and poetry continued to be widely read, but in a more dispassionate atmosphere.

Soldier and sailor rhymes predominated in Kipling's earlier collections of verse, and among these are his most characteristic (though not most beautiful) poems. By making the uneducated British fighting man articulate, Kipling brought a new element into English poetry. With its dropped consonants and distorted vowels, its sprinkling of foreign words picked up on active service, and its technical jargon, this rude and ungainly speech is difficult to accommodate to the mood of poetry, though on general grounds it is as defensible as the Dorset dialect of William Barnes or the Scottish peasant speech of Burns. There is, however, a reasonable complaint to be made against Kipling in this connexion. He was a cultured Anglo-Indian (born in Bombay), and though he travelled widely and studied the British soldier at close quarters, 'Cockney' was virtually a foreign tongue to him. In his use of this dialect, therefore, he was performing a literary trick, rather than employing a natural medium of expression: the self-conscious man of letters can be detected behind the tatter of illiterate sounds. A born Cockney knows that a 'foreigner' is

speaking, and suspects that the fellow is trying, condescendingly, to talk down to his level. From this point of view, it is arguable that Kipling's parade of malformed and crippled words (e.g., 'ave, 'er, guv, chanst, Gawd, bloomin', orficers an' lydies) is an offence against literary good manners.

In an unpublished letter, C. E. Montague referred to Kipling as 'a fifth-form genius', and as a craftsman in verse his equipment was that of a master-in-embryo. He did not always use his technical gift to advantage, and when the weeding-out process is undertaken there will be much doggerel to remove. But over against his ready tendency to drop into jog-trot verse must be set the almost Miltonic impressiveness with which he can marshal the pageantry of names—names of people and places,¹ of ships,² flowers, and herbs.³ The power at the command of a skilful craftsman in verse is also shown in *Boots*. The sickening and deadly state of semi-idiocy produced in a marching column of exhausted soldiers, is conveyed with exact effect by the deliberate processional monotony of hammered syllables. If it were true, as William Morris believed, that 'craftsmanship is all', Kipling at his best might stand among the leading English poets. Yet the magical something that lies beyond craftsmanship—that intensity of vision which vitalizes the idea and spirit of great poetry—is rare in Kipling. He wrote 'patriotic' poems (such as *The Ballad of the 'Clampherdown'*) and 'English' poems (such as *The Way Through the Woods*). Ideas of militant patriotism vary from age to age, but for Englishmen the love of England endures, and it is the *English* poems of Kipling that are likely to be remembered.

His poetry has little metaphysical interest. What served as a philosophy of life in most of Kipling's poetry was the conviction that Englishmen were divinely charged with the duty of enlightening the world's

¹ *The Run of the Downs; The Land; The Roman Centurion's Song; The Last Sutte.*

² *Mine Sweepers, etc.*

³ 'Our Fathers of Old.'

fluttered folk and wild—
 Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
 Half-devil and half-child.¹

His attitude—partly domineering, partly humble—was that of benevolent despotism. Impatient of the belief widely current for a while in the early part of this century, that every race has the right to be free even though freedom may imply misery and subjection contentment, Kipling wanted the world cleaned up. He preached that the cleaners were not to expect gratitude for their pains; they were to go about their task as 'serfs and sweepers', determined that the work should be carried through, though it be against the will of 'the silent, sullen peoples':

Take up the white man's burden—
 And reap his old reward:
 The blame of those ye better,
 The hate of those ye guard—
 The cry of hosts ye humour
 (Ah, slowly!) toward the light—
 'Why brought ye us from bondage,
 Our loved Egyptian night?'

Kipling's doctrine appeared to make little headway after the new century began. The idea of self-determination in national and racial affairs inclined men to believe that if 'subject peoples' preferred to live in Egyptian night, they should not be 'humoured' compulsorily towards the dawn. Between Kipling's view and the doctrine of 'Liberty at any cost' there could be no reconciliation, but by the time he died the dogma of the Strong Man, long repudiated in Britain, was dominant abroad.

While Kipling was writing *Barrack Room Ballads* in the early years of the eighteen-nineties, W. B. Yeats was laying the foundations of the Irish literary movement, described in the preceding chapter. The full effect of Yeats's work for the Irish theatre was not seen until after 1901. His most popular collections of lyrics, however, were *Poems*

¹ *The White Man's Burden* (1899).

(1895) and *The Wind among the Reeds* (1899). He continued to produce lyrics as well as plays after 1901, and in the opinion of some of his contemporaries the *Later Poems* (1922) showed an increase of poetic power, and there was a deepening of intellectual quality. In one of the poems of his middle period he complained, 'I am worn out with dreams'—a memorable fragment of self-criticism. It has been pointed out¹ that comparatively early, Yeats began to cut himself off from a source of poetic energy that had been to him, as to greater poets, remarkably fruitful. As a young man he enriched his poems with concrete images, but these became fewer as the impulse to draw upon personal observation of nature grew fainter. It appeared as if he, also, fled

And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.²

For the glory that was gained, there was a counterbalancing loss of patience to watch for the nearer beauties that once held him: 'wet wild strawberry leaves', 'drowsy water rats', 'mice in the barley sheaves', 'bubbles in a frozen pond'. Carried away as he was by dreams, by theosophy and Eastern mysticism, the faery's song in Yeats's own poem, *The Stolen Child*, might have been applied to himself:

Away with us he's going,
'The solemn-eyed:
He'll hear no more the lowing
Of the calves on the warm hillside,
Or the kettle on the hob
Sing peace into his breast;
Or see the brown mice bob
Round and round the oatmeal-chest.

The nature of the change can be seen by comparing *The Falling of the Leaves*³ with *Aedh Wishes for the*

¹ See *W. B. Yeats: A Critical Study* (1915), by Forrest Reid.

² *When You are Old (Poems)*.

³ *The Wanderings of Oisín*, 1888 (now included in *Poems*).

Cloths of Heaven.¹ The beauty of the second poem (published ten years later than the first) is more tenuous and unstable than the beauty of the other. No poet has been successful in escaping from earth and making his poetry exclusively from the tapestries of heaven. It is no defence to reply that 'the heaven's embroidered cloths enwrought with gold and silver light' suggests a rare magnificence of beauty that is not to be found in

Yellow the leaves of the rowan above us
And yellow the wet wild strawberry leaves.²

The increase of occasional magnificence is not disputed, but what is gained does not compensate for the loss of touch with natural things. In moods when ethereal beauties were beyond his reach, Yeats declined upon pretty literary artifices and fragments of Christmas-tree decoration—'moth-like stars' and 'silver apples of the moon'. At such times he was little better poet than Oscar Wilde, who likened the sun to a 'heated opal'.

The Lake Isle of Innisfree effects a compromise between concrete picturing and dream-like imagining. The cabin of clay and wattle, the bean rows and the honey-bee; 'evening full of the linnet's wings'; the lapping of lake-water—these are actualities recalled by the exile. When a more freely imaginative picture is used (as in the lines:

—for peace comes dropping slow,

Dropping from the veils of the morning, to where the cricket sings), the infusion of personal feeling is powerful enough to make the image more substantial than a vague dream-tracery of words. The widespread appeal of *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* does not depend wholly upon response to the sentiment of the words. The studiously careful rhythmical structure is equally effective. Yeats freed himself from the metrical regularity he had previously observed, and gave attention mainly to securing a rhythmical basis which should allow scope for natural speech-stress, and also for the general

¹ *The Wind Among the Reeds*.

² *Poems*.

maintenance of natural word-order. Some use is made of repetition, but little of inversion. There is no rigid syllabic structure, the number of syllables to the line ranging from eight to fifteen. The emotional effect of the poem is also heightened by the subtle interaction of vowel music and consonant values, combining a preponderance of open vowels (sometimes further lengthened by the governing rhythm) with a judicious use of alliteration and sibilants, to suggest the bees and linnets, crickets and lapping water. This might seem, at first, to be no more than the familiar device of *onomatopoeia*, but that device forms only the stem upon which a variety of other devices is grafted. Few modern poems can have had so much artistry lavished upon them as *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, but it and much of his work of that period was imbued with the romanticism which Yeats distrusted more and more as he aged. In a remarkable and unusual way he moved with the current of the times, and though—as his editorial preface to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1937) shows—he was capricious in his views on poetry, he had both sympathy and understanding for the younger generation of poets whose ideals were so different from those of his own youth. Recurrently in the poems of his last years the continuing vigour of his mind and senses is in revolt against the enfeeblement of his body: ‘lust and rage’ were with him still to spur him into song.¹ His progress as a lyrical poet can be gauged from a comparison of the Innisfree poem (1895) with the more complex *Byzantium* (1930), the first having a plastic loveliness, the other a beauty that is not less but only less malleable in its suggestion. It was, particularly, the harder quality of beauty in Yeats’s poems during his last phase that aligned him with the poets of the new age.

A. E. Housman (1859–1936) was remarkable for the perfection of his poetic workmanship, astonishing in one who had little time to give to poetry. His output was small—but it would be difficult to find a weak line. Everything

¹ *The Spur in Last Poems and Last Plays*, 1940.

was winnowed with scrupulous care, and he admitted nothing superfluous or merely decorative in form or style. While there is no excess, at the same time there is no insufficiency: everything is perfectly adjusted and adequate for its purpose. Housman made effective use of vowel quality and the balance of vowel sounds, but (unlike the majority of poets) he depended much upon explosive consonants—B, T, D, P, K, M—especially when used in the final position.¹ The extraordinary simplicity of his vocabulary is shown by an analysis of *Bredon Hill*,² which contains 191 words: two of these are trisyllables; twenty-seven disyllables; the remainder (162 words) are monosyllables. Housman had the secret of creating beauty by rigid exclusion of ornament. One of his most beautiful poems, *Loveliest of Trees*³ contains only one epithet of beauty, and no adjectives of colour. The exquisite picture is built up by means of four principal words—three nouns and one adjective: *bloom*, *white* ('wearing white for Easter-tide'), *snow*, and *loveliest*.

In regard to the content of his poetry, Housman had a superficial likeness to Hardy, but his philosophic outlook resulted in an altogether different attitude. Hardy lived entrenched behind his sombre defences, enduring the siege perilous; Housman was out in the open, serene amid the battle—undismayed because entirely without hope:

I pace the earth, and drink the air, and feel the sun.
Be still, be still, my soul; it is but for a season:
Let us endure an hour and see injustice done.⁴

Hardy was too sensitive to be actively a rebel; Housman too resolute in an heroic despair. His theoretical attitude towards poetry, enlivened by indications as to the actual making of his own poems, was outlined in his Leslie Stephen lecture at Cambridge in 1933 on *The Name and Nature of Poetry*.

¹ e.g., *Reveille* (*A Shropshire Lad*, 1896).

² *Ibid.*

³ *A Shropshire Lad*.

⁴ *Ibid.* (XLVIII).

§ 2. *Thomas Hardy*

Between 1871 and 1896 Thomas Hardy published the prose works which placed him alongside Meredith as one of the two outstanding novelists of the late Victorian period. The hostile reception given to *Jude the Obscure* brought Hardy's career as a novelist to an end. Although his later books were immoderately attacked on account of their bitter dissent from orthodox moral and religious standards, Hardy's reputation was already secure when, deliberately, he closed the first phase of his writing life. He then went on to do what no writer had done before—namely, to build up a second reputation, and a third. It is the second and third phases of his work that belong to twentieth-century literature.

Thomas Hardy (born at Upper Bockhampton, near Dorchester, in 1840; died 1928) was descended from an old Jersey family that migrated to England before the end of the sixteenth century. A Thomas Hardy who died at Melcombe Regis in 1599 was an ancestor of Nelson's flag captain Admiral Sir Thomas Hardy, from whom, in turn, the novelist and poet traced his descent. Hardy's father was a builder, his mother the daughter of a Dorsetshire small landowner, and the centuries of settled English tradition in Hardy's ancestral record undoubtedly stimulated and sustained his interest in the ancient English kingdom of Wessex. Hardy's Wessex is much more than a scenic setting for his stories and poems; it is the dominating Over-Character brooding constantly above his works, and casting its changeless shadow upon the author as well as upon the people in his books. He lays 'reiterated emphasis upon the unaltering aspect of large tracts of Wessex. Egdon Heath is 'a face upon which time makes but little impression'¹ . . . 'a tract of country unaltered from that sinister condition which made Caesar anxious every year to get clear of its glooms before the autumnal equinox'.² The men and women of Hardy's Wessex, though living in

¹ *The Return of the Native* (Book I, ch. 1). ² *Ibid.* (Book I, ch. 6).

the nineteenth century, are subject to 'curious fetichistic fears' and touched by a 'lumber of superstitions, folk-lore, dialect, and orally transmitted ballads'.¹ The tragedies that fall upon them are often due, in Hardy's interpretation, to the intrusion of modern customs and new habits of mind. Themselves the product of association between the past and the present, these Wessex people are 'harnessed by the irrepressible New'.² The decorative veneer of civilization and progress lies uneasily upon them. Grace Melbury turns upon her father with the cry, 'I wish you had never, never thought of educating me. I wish I worked in the woods like Marty South! I hate genteel life. . . . Cultivation has only brought me inconveniences and troubles.'³ The timeless, changeless spirit of Wessex speaks in her, revolting against newness and 'cultivation'. For the full significance of Hardy's Wessex to be realized, it must stand in the consciousness of readers like an eternal Presence, both in the poems and the prose. Wessex was a persistent and symbolic factor in Hardy's mentality. Unlike Wordsworth, who was for a time possessed by Nature's 'weird hauntings', Hardy never passed on to experience her 'holy calm'. Though he loved Nature he found little consolatory power in her, and her constant appearance to him was probably as it was, temporarily, to Wordsworth in a troubled period:

Growing still in stature the grim shape
 Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
 For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
 And measured motion like a living thing,
 Strode after me.⁴

Before his first novel was published (in 1871) Hardy had written poems which remained in manuscript until 1898. These early experiments belong to the years from 1865 to 1869, when he was practising as an architect, and before

¹ *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (ch. 3).

² *The Return of the Native* (Book I, ch. 1).

³ *The Woodlanders* (ch. 30).

⁴ *The Prelude* (Book I).

he turned to literature as a profession. He said that he was compelled to give up poetry in 1868, no doubt under economic pressure, and his public career as a poet did not begin until *Wessex Poems* (1898) appeared. But Hardy's prose was always that of a man of acute poetic vision. He records in the novels a thousand and one aspects of nature—from the tiny twig 'on the bare bough of a tree stretched horizontally against the evening fire' of the western sky, to the immense landscapes of Blackmoor Vale and Egdon Heath. These things are seen through the eye of a poet, and it must have been with delight that he turned back at length to verse.

From 1866 to 1925 there is little change of outlook in Hardy's poetry. A few harmonies are heard in the old man's songs at seventy that were absent from the harsher tunes of the young man of twenty-five; but *Hap*¹ (written in 1866) might have been the seed from which *The Dynasts* grew, for the interpretation of the universe is the same in *Hap* as it was in the great epic-drama written forty years later. This consistency in Hardy's philosophy is striking—deeply impressive even—because it conveys a sense of something far more potent than merely crabbed and stubborn pessimism. Though the root remained fixed, the tree grew and extended its branches over an area as wide as Europe.

In *Hap* the 'suffering thing' is one single person, whose joy lies slain and whose best hope has failed. The sufferer questions why this should be; and the only answer that suggests itself to him is that human destiny lies in the hands of a blind and indifferent power which strews joy and pain with a nerveless and purposeless hand:

These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown
Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.

Hardy puts the same question time after time, in one form or another:

¹ *Wessex Poems*.

'Has some Vast Imbecility,
Mighty to build and blend,
But impotent to tend,
Framed us in jest, and left us now to hazardry?
Or come we of an Automaton
Unconscious of our pains? . . .'¹

Sometimes, the poet implied, no answer is given; but when an answer does come, it is with the unvarying suggestion that the world and humanity are all part of one vast unconsciousness—'an ever unconscious automatic sense, unweeting why or whence'. The most mature statement of this central theme in Hardy's poetry is in *The Dynasts*, where the problem of individual suffering merges into the vision of a world in travail. The first few pages of the Fore Scene in the Overworld contain the essence of Hardy's final presentation of his philosophy. 'What of the Immanent Will and Its designs?' asks the Shade of the Earth; and as the scenes proceed, a detailed response is slowly elicited from the several Spirits—a response with these main keynotes:

It works unconsciously, as heretofore,
Eternal artistries in Circumstance . . .

.
Thinking on, yet weighing not Its thought,
Unchecks Its clock-like laws . . .

.
This viewless, voiceless Turner of the Wheel . . .
.

Like a knitter drowsed,
Whose fingers play in skilled unmindfulness,
The Will has woven with an absent heed
Since life first was; and ever will so weave.

Throughout *The Dynasts*, the Spirit of the Pities yields the one faint element of hope—so faint as to seem no better

¹ *Nature's Questioning* (*Wessex Poems*).

than the hope of a climber struggling on a polished mountain of dark glass. In the last Chorus of the Pities (at the end of the After Scene) there is a somewhat stronger final flash of brightness, suggestive of man's ultimate release from the presumed mindless and soulless domination of the Immanent Will:

. . . a stirring fills the air
Like to sounds of joyance there
That the rages
Of the ages

Shall be cancelled, and deliverance offered from the darts that were,
Consciousness the Will informing, till It fashion all things fair.

Except among those who are governed by a dispassionately speculative temper, it is almost certain that the repeated charge of pessimism will continue to be brought against Hardy, though there is no sound reason why pessimism should automatically be regarded as an indictment demanding defence or apology. A poet-philosopher can scarcely be unhappy in pain; and it is possible for a philosophy of pessimism to be accepted by a man who is completely happy in himself.¹ Yet the view was widely held that Hardy must always have been exceedingly unhappy. If this was so, his unhappiness originated, not in his philosophic pessimism, but in his acute sense of pity. He was vulnerable through his emotions rather than through his mind, and was almost morbidly sensitive to pain suffered by other creatures:

Why, O starving bird, when I
One day's joy would justify,
And put misery out of view,
Do you make me notice you?²

For one whose sensibilities were so sharp as this poem (and

* ¹ 'The poetical character . . . lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated. . . . It does no harm from its relish for the dark side of things, any more than from its taste for the bright one, because they both end in speculation.' (Keats's letter to Richard Woodhouse, October 27, 1818).

² *The Reminder* (*Time's Laughingstocks*).

much else in Hardy) suggests, philosophic pessimism must have been a valuable anodyne. Christian fortitude may inure a soul to its own agonies without reconciling it to the sufferings of others. 'Life had bared its bones,' to Hardy, and he sought refuge from the 'long drip of human tears'.¹ He found that refuge in what others call pessimism, but he preferred to define it as "'obstinate questionings" in the exploration of reality', and he regarded this policy of obstinate questioning as 'the first step towards the soul's betterment and the body's also'.² In this connexion Hardy called special attention to a line in one of his early poems (*In Tenebris*):

If way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst
—a courageous doctrine, though comforting to few.

Hardy's first sixty years fell in Victorian times, but his continual 'obstinate questionings' separated him from spiritual affinity with Victorianism and marked him as a forerunner of the Age of Interrogation. Kipling, a good Victorian, was at the opposite extreme; he was not plaintively interrogative, but acquiescent and dogmatically assertive, as his *Natural Theology* shows:

This was none of the good Lord's pleasure,
For the Spirit He breathed in Man is free;
But what comes after is measure for measure,
And not a God that afflicteth thee.
As was the sowing so the reaping
Is now and ever more shall be.
Thou art delivered to thine own keeping.
Only thyself hath afflicted thee.

Kipling marched with trumpets, affirming that the God of our fathers lives and reigns; Hardy stood brooding by the wayside, imagining 'God's funeral' passing by:

I saw a slowly-stepping train—
Lined in the brows, scoop-eyed and bent and hoar—

¹ *On an Invitation to the United States (Poems of the Past and the Present).*

² See the *Apology* prefixed to *Late Lyrics and Earlier.*

And they composed a crowd of whom
 Some were right good, and many nigh the best . . .
 Thus dazed and puzzled 'twixt the gleam and gloom
 Mechanically I followed with the rest.¹

In the early years of this century, critics were reluctant to allow that Hardy had any claim to be considered seriously as a lyric poet. As further volumes appeared, however, opinion veered, and with the publication of the collected edition (1919) his second reputation began to challenge the first.

Much has been made by some writers of the fact that Hardy was trained as an architect. Though the 'architectural structure of his plots' may have been over-emphasized, he certainly had the architect's ability to deal with massive structures. His best novels are built in grandeur, and he was truly impressive in his power to communicate the brooding spirit of great places—of Egdon, of Stonehenge, of the Vale of Blackmoor. His most memorable characters, also, are conceived on the grand scale. Though Tess is a broken peasant girl she is immense in her power of endurance. Jude is a tragic failure—but he is a *great* failure. Where Hardy had space in which to move freely he created with the power of genius; where he was circumscribed, his creative ability became cramped and abortive.

To suggest that Hardy needed space, is not to imply that he was incapable of using the lyric form with success, or that he needed always his five hundred pages in order to avoid failure. He wrote few things more likely to live than the war lyric, *In Time of 'the Breaking of Nations'*,² containing only sixty-three words. Is it possible, then, to reconcile this small piece of perfection with the theory that Hardy was essentially a 'spacious' writer? The answer may be reached by reference to another lyric, *Shelley's Skylark*.³ In 1887 Hardy was in the neighbourhood of Leghorn, where Shelley wrote *To a Skylark* in 1820. Most

¹ *God's Funeral (Lyrics and Reveries)*.

² *Moments of Vision*.

³ *Poems of the Past and the Present*.

people think of Shelley's bird as a creature immortal in itself, alive and ever in flight. Not so Hardy. He thought of it as a thing perished; it

Lived its meek life; then, one day, fell—
A little ball of feather and bone;

and is now 'a pinch of unseer, unguarded dust'. It was when Hardy permitted himself a spacious *vision*—allowing room for his spirit to move freely—that he created with the power of unquestionable genius. *In Time of 'the Breaking of Nations'* has for its theme little less than the whole aim and direction of the active human spirit, and in that unbounded field of vision Hardy was able to exercise the full scope of his mind and art. The fewness of the words in no way reduces the magnitude of the achievement; rather it enhances it, by fulfilling one of the requirements of great poetry—that it should hold 'an ocean of thought in a drop of language'. In *Shelley's Skylark*, on the contrary, Hardy harnessed his vision to a speck of dust. This is a fault common to a large number of his lyrics, and it applies with particular force to the sequence of fifteen *Satires of Circumstance*.

Never at any time is Hardy's poetry intoxicating or magical. Occasionally it approaches profundity, or rises towards a guarded exultation;¹ but its chief characteristic is a 'satisfying flatness'. It is 'satisfying', because it presents the interesting spectacle of a mind continually probing and exploring; while its 'flatness' is produced by the persistent pressure of the Spirit of Negation. Negations are not exhilarating; and when Hardy's poetry does leave flatness behind, temporarily, it is because affirmation is for a moment in the ascendant.² Hardy avoided the charm of verbal felicity. Though his rhymes and metres are extraordinarily resourceful, the effect is often discounted by a wanton angularity of phrase. This combination of ugly word-forms with a carefully considered verse-technique is

¹ e.g., 'When I set out for Lyonesse' (*Lyrics and Reveries*).

² e.g., *In Time of 'the Breaking of Nations'*.

a curious and recurrent feature in the lyrics. *The Alarm*,¹ for example, suggests Hardy's aural obtuseness and imperfect sense of literary tact, for here (in a narrative poem on a traditional theme) he put into the mouth of a Wessex peasant soldier of the Napoleonic period such constructions as *antedate*, *jeopardize*,² etc. Elsewhere he borrowed a variety of terms belonging to science and philosophy, subjects unhappily handicapped by a complex jargon. Such features in Hardy's poetry are as disturbing as an ugly wound on an otherwise comely face.

The third of Hardy's reputations rests upon *The Dynasts*. The test of mere bigness is not often apposite in literature, though in relation to the twentieth century it is a significant test. Since the passing of the great Victorians, poets had shown little of that power of sustained production possessed by most poets of the first rank. Between 1906 and 1920 Charles Doughty wrote several lengthy works in verse,³ but his archaisms and crabbed style deterred most people, even those who admire his masterly travel book, *Arabia Deserta*.

The Dynasts is by far the biggest single work in English literature since the Victorian age, and is almost certainly the greatest: great in conception and in execution. Originally published in three parts (1904, 1906, 1908) this Epic-Drama of the war with Napoleon is presented in nineteen acts and one hundred and thirty scenes, the action covering ten years, from 1805 to Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo.

In this crowning achievement, most of the Hardy-esque elements that had previously distinguished his novels and

¹ *Wessex Poems*.

² It is interesting to note the comparative effect of Chaucer's use of the word *jeopardize*. Meeting it in *The Boke of the Duchesse* (line 666) the reader feels no incongruity between the word and the speaker, nor between the word and its surroundings. As in *The Alarm*, so in the earlier poem, *jeopardize* is a rhyme-word; but there is no sign that the exigencies of rhyme, alone, dictated its use by Chaucer.

³ *The Dawn in Britain*, etc.

short poems are gathered up in a unified form, and applied in an attempt to represent and account for the Human Tragedy. Mention has already been made of the manner in which Hardy pursues, in *The Dynasts*, his interrogation of the universe, conducted here by the Phantom Intelligences which he created 'as spectators of the terrestrial action'. Hardy's purpose was to dispense with both the Greek and the Hebrew theogony,¹ and to substitute a supernatural system acceptable to modern minds capable of 'that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith'. George Meredith (in the first chapter of *The Egoist*) discusses the question of whether the literary artist should consider life minutely with 'the watchmaker's eye' or 'under the broad Alpine survey of the Spirit'. Hardy does both in *The Dynasts*. Through the Phantom Intelligences the world is observed as under the broad Alpine survey of the Spirit, while through the speech and actions of the human figures—'the Persons'—smaller 'patches of life' are seen in detail, as under a magnifying glass. Hardy followed historical sources as closely as is consistent with the poet's function: that is to say, he took historical fact as his raw material and created from it a vision of life that is, in essentials, 'truer' than history. The formal historian has no other duty than to record plainly the actions of men through the eyes of a man; his view is earthbound. But the poet is a visionary as well as a clear-sighted human creature. He sees from the heights of imagination as well as from the level of earth; he possesses something of divinity in amplification of his powers as a man. *The Dynasts*, therefore, offers this two-fold (or, rather, manifold) view of a 'vast international tragedy'—Europe's life-or-death struggle against Napoleon, 'the Man of inharmonious jars'. Hardy's vision permits the reader to obtain a view which sweeps over insular and continental boundaries, escapes from social class-divisions,

¹ As in (a) Aeschylus and other Greek tragic poets; and (b) Milton's *Paradise Lost*, etc.

and transcends the limitations of human sight. The conflict is seen as it appeared to French and Austrian, English and Russian; to monarch and peasant, marshal and common soldier; to servants, spies, and street women; to spirit messengers and recording angels. Hardy, unlike Kipling, was never associated in the public mind with enthusiastic patriotism, but it is worth while to note that part of Hardy's purpose in *The Dynasts* was to redress the balance of history, by emphasizing what Continental historians had previously disregarded—namely, that England's achievement was vitally important in saving the world from Napoleonic domination.

The man Napoleon is the central figure of the tragic conflict in *The Dynasts*, which might indeed be entitled *The Tragedy of Napoleon Buonaparte*. The other dynastic personages—kings and queens, military and naval leaders—are not in themselves essentially tragic. Napoleon, on the contrary, as Hardy represents him, is a towering tragic figure, 'the Man of Destiny' in whom is implanted some influence that carries him onwards in spite of himself; deluding him with false promises of triumph; luring him at last to defeat and ruin. To the Queen of Prussia, Napoleon says:

Know you, my Fair,
That I—ay, I—in this deserve your pity—
Some force within me, baffling mine intent,
Harries me onward, whether I will or no.¹

And again, in his soliloquy after the defeat at Waterloo:

A miss-mark they will dub me;
And yet—I found the crown of France in the mire,
And with the point of my prevailing sword
I picked it up! But for all this and this
I shall be nothing. . . .
To shoulder Christ from out the topmost niche
In human fame, as once I fondly felt,
Was not for me. . . .
Great men are meteors that consume themselves
To light the earth. This is my burnt-out hour.²

¹ Part II, Act 1, Sc. viii.

² III, 7, ix.

This revelation of inward conflict ranks Hardy's Napoleon with the tragic heroes of Greek and Shakespearian drama, though the fundamental Idea of Tragedy is not one and the same in all three.

The further tragic element in *The Dynasts* (the conflict between 'the pale panting multitudes'¹ and the Immanent Will) cannot be more than mentioned here, though it is of the utmost importance in Hardy's design, and is implicit in his motto on the title-page:

And I heard sounds of insult, shame, and wrong,
And trumpets blown for wars.

Nor is there space to dwell upon the skill and variety of the versification; the vivid originality and force of the 'stage directions'; the remarkable set of original songs and ballads distributed in the text;² or the scenes of rustic comedy,³ in respect of which (in *The Dynasts* and elsewhere) Hardy has been compared with Shakespeare.

§ 3. *Narrative and Satire*

The disparity between popular taste and critical opinion is often seen in an aggravated form in relation to story-telling in verse. Simplification of thought, romantic colouring, and smooth facility in versification—these are qualities which commend a particular type of narrative poetry even to readers who find little pleasure in other kinds of verse. From Scott onwards there has been in English literature a succession of story-tellers in verse, and when the larger public has delighted in poetry at all it is usually vigorous narrative poetry that has been bought and read.

Alfred Noyes shared with Kipling the distinction of being one of the few early twentieth-century poets who attracted an eager and loyal audience. It was recorded that Noyes

¹ *After Scene*.

² See Part I, Act 1, Sc. i; I, 5, vii; III, 1, xi; III, 2, i; III, 5, vi.

³ See I, 2, v; I, 5, vii; III, 5, vi.

was 'the one modern poet who could make poetry—even the epic—pay'¹ Yet when interest in contemporary poetry revived, about 1912, he was neglected (and sometimes abused) by those writers and critics who were most desirous of fostering the revival. His own public continued faithful to him, and (like Noyes himself) was alternately puzzled and indignant when commentators suggested that his verse was poor stuff. Actually, Noyes was as good and as bad a poet as most of those who scoffed at him. Though he became the bugbear of some of the young 'Georgians', his limitations were theirs also. They all alike laid out the stock-in-trade of the versifier on a pedlar's tray and offered pretty images and glittering toys as poetry. The main difference between Alfred Noyes and the duller of the Georgians is that their stock was smaller and more pretentious than his, and that they cried their wares more lustily. He lingered in the faint but mellow Victorian twilight; they belonged to the Georgian false dawn.

While Noyes went along the old familiar road, John Masfield had been experimenting both in life and literature. Leaving his Shropshire home (where he was born in 1874) he ran away to sea, and memories of that period are given in *Dauber* (1913). Following some experience as a working sailor

He took to the road in America, living a free vagrant life, sleeping in barns, working here and there on farms, finally turning up in New York, where he got a job at ten dollars a month in the Colonial Hotel, and earned his money by about sixteen hours' handiwork a day, scouring beer taps, cleaning cuspidors (which we call spittoons) and ejecting turbulent patrons. At about two or two-thirty a.m. he went to his garret, where he read *Morte D'Arthur*, his only book, until he fell asleep.²

Once or twice Masfield lifts the veil and allows himself to be seen 'roughing it'.³ After working as a gardener

¹ *Contemporary British Literature*, by Manly and Rickert.

² A. G. Gardiner (in the *Daily News*, May 3, 1913).

³ As in *A Raines Law Arrest (A Tarpaulin Muster)*.

and a potman he returned to England and, becoming a journalist, edited the daily Miscellany column in the *Manchester Guardian*. Then he went back to London and settled in Bloomsbury, where he made friends with several well-known writers, including J. M. Synge, the Irish playwright. These two took many long walks through London, engaged in talk which often kept them wandering half the night along deserted streets.¹

Between 1901 and 1911 John Maschfield wrote poems, plays, novels, short stories, essays, and criticism, all with moderate success; and he was an established writer before the remarkable outburst of acclamation which greeted *The Everlasting Mercy* on its appearance in the *English Review* in 1911. That long narrative poem in octosyllabic couplets was an attempt to represent in verse, realistically, the spiritual conversion of a prodigal, 'tokened to the devil'. Saul Kane, the central character, tells the story in his own words, and Maschfield suppresses nothing: the brutality, the delirium, the foul language—all are there, in the first half of the poem. Later, when Saul Kane has been converted by a Quaker woman, his spiritual ecstasy is described. Amid the earlier blasphemous passages there are attempts at poetry, but the incongruous mixture would have been more effective as a seventeenth-century Puritan tract. It plunges into bathos—

John and Mary died of measles,
And Rob was drowned at the Teasels.
And little Nan, dear little sweet,
A cart run over in the street;
Her little shift was all one stain,
I prayed God put her out of pain—

and it does not justify the many such passages to suppose that Maschfield was aiming at the kind of verse Saul Kane himself might have been expected to produce. Bald pedestrian jog-trot and ludicrous manufactured rhymes also characterize the other long narrative pieces which

¹ See Maschfield's poem, *Biography*.

Masefield wrote in the following years: *The Widow in the Bye Street* (1912) and *The Daffodil Fields* (1913). *Dauber* (1913), though not free from such blemishes, is relieved by fine passages of sea poetry. These poems were written in reaction from picturesque modes of versifying, and caused a sensation by their newness. But with that their interest ends. The ugliness and the bathos are less discomfiting than the attempt to patch on bits of nature poetry and bits of religious poetry here and there. The effect is as if some maudlin and obscene hag in a police court should drunkenly mumble fragments of Wordsworth and Francis Thompson.

John Masefield had done better work in his *Saltwater Ballads* (1902) and *Ballads and Poems* (1910), in which such pieces as *Sea Fever* and *Cargoes* appeared; and he was afterwards to write a better narrative poem—*Reynard the Fox* (1919). This record of a fox-hunt is notable for its Chaucerian ‘thumb-nail’ sketches of human character in the description of the meet in the first part; and the fox’s-eye view of the run in part two. Here the poet is in control of his rhythms and metres, and not their slave as in the earlier narrative poems. By prosodic variation the changing sensations of the fox are imaginatively indicated—his first excitement, his fear, his growing weariness, his relief when

The threat of the hounds behind was gone,
and how (after the scent is found again)

His strength was broken, his heart was bursting,
His bones were rotten, his throat was thirsting;
His feet were reeling, his brush was thick
From dragging the mud, and his brain was sick.

But the fox escapes and the poem ends with a quiet descriptive passage. *Reynard the Fox* is among the best sustained narrative poems written in the quarter-century. Masefield’s appointment as Poet Laureate on the death of Bridges

in 1930 was interpreted as the Labour Government's recognition of his knowledge of and sympathy with the working classes.

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Journalism has been a convenient by-road to literature for many authors; for G. K. Chesterton the poet, on the contrary, it proved a blind alley. An inveterate journalist, his eyes and ears strained towards the affairs of the hour; and like all satirical poets below the first rank he treated the insignificant twitterings of minor politicians as seriously as if they were the blasphemous thunders of the lords of hell. His *Collected Poems* (1933) is, therefore, a lop-sided affair, with page after page of versified disquisitions upon phrases extracted from current newspapers, magazines, sermons and speeches. But amid this jumbled mass are a score or so of pieces that no other English poet could have written. The long narrative poems—*Lepanto*, *The Ballad of St. Barbara*, and *The Ballad of the White Horse*—are less impressive than ambitious: none of them has a compelling story-interest, but in *Lepanto* there are a number of passages that are rousing when declaimed; for example:

Don John pounding from the slaughter-painted poop,
Purpling all the ocean like a bloody pirate's sloop,
Scarlet running over on the silvers and the golds,
Breaking of the hatches up and bursting of the holds,
Thronging of the thousands up that labour under sea
White for bliss and blind for sun and stunned for liberty.

This is stirring verse if not first-rate poetry. Probably few readers or speakers care what the lines are *about*—the syllabic pomp suffices.

Among Chesterton's satirical poems the twelve-line *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* is so good that the rest of his satires seem trivial in comparison. It has the advantage of a theme that, though 'timed', is likely to remain applicable for generations to come; and it has, also, pity and a fine indignation to raise it above the level of satire that is

tinged by partisan prejudice and personal animus. Compared with the *Elegy*, there is an absurd air of humourless inflation about *Antichrist, or The Reunion of Christendom: An Ode*, in which Chesterton attacks F. E. Smith (the first Lord Birkenhead) for a now long-forgotten speech on the Welsh Disestablishment Bill.

The best section of G. K. Chesterton's verse is the group of road-songs and drinking-songs scattered through his novel, *The Flying Inn*,¹ Their combination of wisdom and nonsense, humour and high spirits is irresistible and unique, and these (together with one impressive 'serious' lyric, *The Donkey*) constitute Chesterton's indispensable contribution to English poetry.

Hilaire Belloc's verse is smaller in quantity than that of his intimate friend G. K. Chesterton, but it includes less perishable stuff. A few of his lyrics (such as *The South Country*) are established firmly in the anthologies. The satirical *Cautionary Tales for Children*²—though caustic and critical—are at the same time delightfully funny. Belloc is also a neat epigrammatist, whether offering a compliment to a friend or directing an arrow at a foe.

Of the younger satirists using traditional verse-forms, Humbert Wolfe (1885-1940) and Roy Campbell received most attention—the former for *News of the Devil* (1926) and *The Uncelestial City* (1930), and the latter for *The Flaming Terrapin* (1924) and *The Georgiad* (1931).

§ 4. *Rupert Brooke and the Soldier Poets*

When Rupert Brooke died at Scyros in the Aegean Sea, on April 17, 1915, he was at once canonized in the popular imagination as St. Rupert of England, and by the influence of his personality rather than his poetry became a prominent figure in contemporary literature. In the tragic stress

¹ These poems, reprinted in *Wine, Water and Song* (1915), are included in *Collected Poems*.

² Included in Belloc's collected *Cautionary Verses* (1939).

of the early months of the Four-Year War, the nation needed a human symbol to keep attention fixed upon the professed idealistic aims for which it had been led into battle. After eight months such a symbol was revealed in the dead poet, Rupert Brooke—remembered, not as a figure of death, but as he was while alive: young, quick and eager, a golden-haired Apollo. His early death while on war-service, his physical beauty, his intellectual gifts, his genius for friendship—these were accepted as marks of 'one who seemed to have everything that is worth having'. So, with little reference to his merits as a poet, Brooke became a sign and symbol of his age—even as, three centuries earlier, another handsome and accomplished young Englishman, Sir Philip Sidney, had been a sign and symbol for the Elizabethans.

Born at Rugby in 1887, Rupert Brooke was the son of a housemaster at Rugby School, where he spent a happy schoolboy life.¹ Later, at King's College, Cambridge, he became absorbed in amateur acting and in the University Fabian Group. Soon he found the Fabians hard and intolerant, devoid of the imaginative idealism urgent in himself. At that time he affirmed:

There are only three things in the world: one is to read poetry, another is to write poetry, and the best of all is to live poetry!

Out of term-time, Brooke lived in a cottage at Grantchester (near Cambridge), of which place he wrote one of his best-known poems. When he left Cambridge, some years were spent in travel—first on the Continent, and afterwards in America and the South Seas.² He returned to London in June 1914. Then came the war. He took part in the unsuccessful defence of Antwerp, and at the end of

¹ Rupert Brooke's biography, by (Sir) Edward Marsh, appeared as an introduction to the *Collected Poems*, and was later issued separately: *Rupert Brooke: A Memoir*.

² See his *Letters from America*.

February, sailed for the East, where he died less than two months later.

Rupert Brooke had at first been attracted by the artifices of the eighteen-nineties group of writers, but he quickly reacted against their vitiated hot-house atmosphere, and wallowed in ugliness in order to demonstrate his distaste for 'pretty' poetry. He wrote sonnets on seasickness and other unsavoury subjects; and, as a protest against the exclusively romantic view of classical heroes, affirmed in the *Menelaus and Helen* sonnets that 'the perfect knight' and 'the perfect queen' afterwards degenerated into disgusting senility. He quickly passed out of that phase, however. Sitting at a Berlin café in 1912 he thought of the 'incredibly lovely superb world', and wrote his poem about one of the loveliest places he knew, *The Old Vicarage, Grantchester*. Though he himself referred to this poem as 'hurried stuff', it is as cool and refreshing as the May fields (of which he speaks) to 'the bare feet that run to bathe'. His love of Nature was neither mystical nor metaphysical. He saw and touched and enjoyed; that was enough for him:

I only know that you may lie
Day long and watch the Cambridge sky,
And, flower-lulled in sleepy grass,
Hear the cool lapse of hours pass,
Until the centuries blend and blur
In Grantchester, in Grantchester.

In *The Great Lover* he wrote of the hundred and one everyday things that gave him joy—plates and cups, dust, wet roofs, wood-smoke, 'the cool kindness of sheets . . . and the rough male kiss of blankets'. He invests this domestic catalogue with significance and beauty, and turns the commonplace into the strangely new.

Though the five sonnets entitled 1914 were enthusiastically received at their first appearance, their poetic qualities probably did not undergo close scrutiny. When war-time emotions had been forgotten, it became fashionable to

decry Rupert Brooke, and to challenge those who admired him. On the evidence of the *Collected Poems* it would be rash to describe him as a great poet; yet he was a poet of remarkable promise, and the 1914 sonnets hint at a growing 'high seriousness' which might have matched his sense of melody with a measure of sustaining thought. Because of its prophetic interest, *The Soldier* became the one poem inseparably linked with Rupert Brooke's name. It is, for all time, his epitaph—beautiful and tranquil; but its broken, staccato movement (awkward for the sonnet form) places it, as poetry, below the first and third sonnets of the 1914 group (*Peace* and *The Dead*) ('Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead!').

It is natural, though unprofitable, to speculate as to what might have been Rupert Brooke's place in English poetry if he had lived on. The marks of greatness in his poems are few, but such marks are there. He saw the world with a clear eye and recorded what he saw with directness and clarity. Yet, however poetic in himself, Rupert Brooke was more important as the occasion of poetry in others; though it is not true, as some have suggested, that the war-time revival of English poetry had its origin in Brooke alone. The emotional necessity of poetry had been independently revealed to the fighting men in Flanders and elsewhere before Rupert Brooke's death stirred home-keeping wits.

In glancing at some other soldier-poets who wrote verse between 1914 and 1918, the next to whom it is common to turn is Julian Grenfell. Though a soldier on active service in France, Grenfell was able to capture at least one mood of tranquillity amid the turmoil, and in that mood wrote *Into Battle*. He wrote other verse, but this is his masterpiece and his memorial, created not out of urgent passions, but through calm and deep communion with unwarlike things. It shows him as a man who, in the midst of fire, could withdraw into himself and find solace, harmony and fellowship with earth and trees and the grass; with stars and the

birds and horses. Death to him did not seem a pit into which he would be plunged headlong and despairing; it was a rest to which he would go as confidently as men go each night to bed:

The thundering line of battle stands,
And in the air Death moans and sings;
But Day shall clasp him with strong hands,
And Night shall fold him in soft wings.

.

The fighting man shall from the sun
Take warmth, and life from the glowing earth;
Speed with the light-foot winds to run,
And with the trees to newer birth;
And find, when fighting shall be done,
Great rest, and fullness after dearth.

This spirit of confidence and tranquillity is unapproached by the other war-time poets. Grenfell preserved his spiritual certitude and moral courage even whilst realizing all that war meant and all that it probably would mean for him very soon. He was killed early in the war.

The Irish peasant poet, Francis Ledwidge, though his poems, also, are quiet in mood, seemed to induce calm within his soul by deliberately averting his eyes and thoughts from the actualities of war; turning to Nature as an antidote for the poison of conflict. In Julian Grenfell is seen the paradox of a man who loved life so passionately that he could go out of life without a tremor. Ledwidge was a lover of life and earth, but his grasp of life was less firm and assured than Grenfell's; to Ledwidge, Death was an enemy; to Grenfell, not an enemy—only a necessary but wretched menial into whose hands had somehow fallen the keys to the gate of Rest. In a poem written in barracks Ledwidge said:

When the war is over I shall take
My lute a-down and sing again
Songs of the whispering things amongst the brake,
And those I love shall know them by their strain.

Their airs shall be the blackbird's twilight song,
Their words shall be all flowers with fresh dews hoar.
But it is lonely now in winter long,
And, God! to hear the blackbird sing once more.¹

He was killed in action in 1917.

Siegfried Sassoon was a very different type of warrior-poet. In the early months of the war he served as an officer, but, being invalided home, resigned his commission and, for a time, conducted a propagandist campaign against war. So, in *Counter Attack*, he set out to present in brutal verse the realities of war without gloss or evasion. The war-poems of Siegfried Sassoon, therefore, take more account of war as a dirty mess of blood and decaying bodies, than as a source of heroic deeds. Many of the verses are a nightmare of horror; if they burn into the memory they have done what the author required. Yet Siegfried Sassoon was quickly disillusioned of hope that the public conscience would be moved to stop war because a soldier told the truth. Some said that his truths were only the gibberings of a crank, and, in the end, Sassoon re-enlisted and went back to the war which truth could not stop. The verses in *Counter Attack* (1918) seldom rise to the level of poetry; but criticism is disarmed by their intense sincerity and the fact that they were put forward as a contribution not to aesthetics but to the cause of human brotherhood. At least these verses reveal the war-mind of thousands who felt (though they might not have spoken in print) as Siegfried Sassoon did:

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go.²

The most discerning of the war anthologies³ contained poems by nearly a hundred writers, and of these about

¹ *The Place* (*Complete Poems of Francis Ledwidge*).

² *Suicide in the Trenches* (*Counter Attack*).

³ *Valour and Vision*, edited by Jacqueline Trotter, 1920.

two-thirds are by soldier-poets. Most of them conformed to the accepted modes of poetry, but Wilfred Owen broke away and tried a form which he considered more suited to the disharmony of war. Before his death in action on November 4, 1918 (at the age of twenty-five), Owen had experimented with assonance and dissonance in place of rhyme, and the jarring effect suggested the clangour of modern warfare without destroying the normal basis of verse-structure. Wilfred Owen's *Poems* (1920) were only about a score in number, and in an unfinished preface he wrote:

This book is not concerned with Poetry.
The subject of it is War, and the pity of War.
The Poetry is in the pity.

The conjunction of poetry and pity can be noted in his most familiar piece, *Strange Meeting*, in which two dead soldiers ('enemies') speak to each other. The waste of young life, and the tragic pathos of cheated youth struck down on the threshold of 'the undone years': these are the themes that move the lips of the second speaker, who closes the poem with the only request that the living millions could grant to the millions dead, 'Let us sleep now. . . .'

§ 5. Georgian Poetry

Poetry given, the problem was to sell it. In the first ten years of the twentieth century English readers bought very little new verse, and with a few exceptions living poets were not considered by publishers as a 'commercial proposition'. By 1912 Rupert Brooke was satisfied that public neglect was a serious hindrance to the development of contemporary poetry. The desire for a wider audience was prompted both by a hope for increased sales (at best, the writers could have little expectation of a sufficient income from poetry) and by the need of intelligent appreciation outside their own coterie. Mental inbreeding among members of literary cliques was a blight and a curse upon

many young twentieth-century authors, and a healthy instinct and sound common sense led Rupert Brooke to attempt to break the narrow and vicious circle.

Edward Marsh has described¹ how Brooke devised a scheme for stimulating public curiosity. He planned to write a volume of poems and to publish it as the work of 'twelve different writers, six men and six women, all with the most convincing pseudonyms'. Edward Marsh made the counter-suggestion of publishing an anthology by 'flesh and blood poets', and at his rooms in Gray's Inn, on September 20, 1912, the suggestion was approved and adopted over luncheon by a party consisting of Rupert Brooke, John Drinkwater, Harold Monroe, W. W. Gibson, Arundel del Ré and Edward (afterwards Sir Edward) Marsh. Though in the future little attention may be paid to the neo-Georgians of 1912-25, they did stir the public to buy and to read poetry, *before* the war threw men back upon elementals which can be expressed only in poetry.

A few weeks before Christmas, 1912, Harold Monroe (1879-1932) published from his Poetry Bookshop in a Bloomsbury slum, a volume in brown paper boards entitled *Georgian Poetry, 1911-12* edited by E. M. (Edward Marsh). A large circulation had been hoped for, but the actual success went beyond expectation. New impressions were called for month after month, and the sales ran into many thousands. Further volumes of *Georgian Poetry* followed at intervals up to 1922, when (with the fifth collection) the series came to an end, though Mrs. Harold Monroe issued in 1933 a supplementary volume. By 1922 the fervour of 1912 had died down in a number of the poets. One or two of the best had unaccountably ceased from producing verse; in others, verse-writing had become merely a habit. The reign of the Georgians was over and the poetic fire—a little dimmed—scattered itself here and there upon other hearths.

¹ *Rupert Brooke: A Memoir.*

The Georgians seemed always on the verge of doing something much better than they had done before—but the possibilities remained possibilities only. The five volumes—brown, blue, green, orange, red—have now a sepulchral air, like five chambers of a mausoleum where faded chaplets encircle the brows of the embalmed. Yet it *was* ‘glorious in that dawn to be alive’, and to share with Edward Marsh the hope that England was ‘at the beginning of another “Georgian period” which might take rank in due time with the several great poetic ages of the past’.

In these five books the work of forty poets was represented. G. K. Chesterton was admitted into the first volume and John Masefield into that and others, but few other well-known writers appeared, though afterwards (and largely through the ministry of *Georgian Poetry*) most of the forty became well known. None was more promising than Ralph Hodgson, who seemed a poet of almost unlimited possibility. *The Bull* and *The Song of Honour*,¹ as well as some of his short lyrics, appeared to bring a new force into English poetry. But *Poems* (1917), including almost all Ralph Hodgson’s work, contains only about seventy pages, and it is evident that he, like other contemporaries, was not gifted with sustained creative ability. Yet, though Hodgson’s poetry is small in bulk, it has emotional force, subtlety of music, and compresses a wide range of pictorial and dramatic effects into a minimum of words. Compassion for animals is dominant, and he expresses this with passion and vision. In *The Bells of Heaven*² Hodgson speaks of the need of ‘angry prayers’

For shamed and shabby tigers
And dancing dogs and bears,
And wretched blind pit ponies,
And little hunted hares.

If humanitarian pity produced the last three lines, poetic vision and understanding created the image of intolerable

¹ Both in *Georgian Poetry* (II) 1913–15.

² *Georgian Poetry* (III) 1916–17.

indignity in the phrase 'shamed and shabby tigers', with its memorable suggestion of a majestic beast torn from the boundless liberty of the forest and crushed into cowed manginess by some circus-monger. *The Bull*, a more ambitious poem, is an attempt to present, psychologically and poetically, the history of a leader of a herd, dethroned in his old age and decrepitude by a young rebel. The old monarch stands—bewildered, unhappy, sick—waiting only for death, while vultures hover with patient and remorseless persistence:

See him standing dewlap-deep
In the rushes at the lake,
Surly, stupid, half-asleep. . . .

Dreaming things: of days he spent
With his mother gaunt and lean
In the valley warm and green,
Full of baby wonderment,
Blinking out of silly eyes
At a hundred mysteries.

He relives, in a dream, the glories of his past, but the dream fades; he wakes from his vision, clouds of flies about him,

And the dreamer turns away
From his visionary herds
And his splendid yesterday,
Turns to meet the loathly birds
Flocking round him from the skies,
Waiting for the flesh that dies.

Ralph Hodgson here treated an unpleasant and ugly subject without glozing over the ugliness. Yet neither the ugliness, nor the sobering solemnity of greatness fallen to decay, predominates in the final impression. That final impression is of the grandeur of life, the dignity and courage brought to it, and the majesty that remains even in defeat—the philosophy of the tameless heart. The rest of Hodgson's poetry must be passed over with no more than

mention of his longest and most elusive poem, *The Song of Honour*—a remarkable piece of rhythmical virtuosity in doggerel metre; *Eve*,¹ lovely in its music and word-pictures; and *The Gipsy Girl*,² a masterpiece of compression—the substance of a five-act drama and a psychological novel in twenty lines.

James Stephens, like Hodgson, was troubled by man's cruelty to animals,³ though this theme is not so frequent in his work. The songs of birds and the happy fools of the world are things he liked to hear and to record, as in Mad Patsy's song,⁴ *The Rivals*,⁵ and *The Fifteen Acres*.⁶ Still more striking than these, however, are two poems of a different kind—*In the Cool of the Evening* and *The Lonely God*.⁷ The first of these creates with extraordinary skill an impression of the agonized suspense in Adam and Eve as they hide from the face of God in Eden:

He will look upon
Our crouching shame, make us stand upright
Burning in terror—O that it were night!
He may not come . . . what? listen, listen, now—
He is here! lie closer . . . *Adam, where art thou?*

The Lonely God, a much longer poem in rhyming couplets (so carefully varied in metrical structure as to suggest something of the dignity of blank verse), describes the scene in Eden after the expulsion of Adam, and considers the sensations of God separated from his creation, Man. James Stephens's poem is not unworthy of a subject of epic magnitude which perhaps only a Milton could treat fully and adequately. It is a fault with many twentieth-century poets that when they write upon 'serious' themes, the result is often heavy and oppressive. Within the limits

¹ *Poems* (1917). ² *Georgian Poetry* (III) 1916-17.

³ *The Snare: Georgian Poetry* (II) 1913-15.

⁴ *In the Poppy Field: Georgian Poetry* (I) 1911-12.

⁵ *Georgian Poetry* (II) 1913-15.

⁶ *Georgian Poetry* (III) 1916-17.

⁷ Both in *Georgian Poetry* (I).

of its length (some 350 lines), however, *The Lonely God* is excellent, and in the strength of its versification suggests superhuman forces. Stephens's later poems were more intellectual and less exciting.

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson—part Hogarth, part Dickens—came closer than any of his immediate contemporaries to representing in verse the deadening specialization of twentieth-century life. It is not a complete picture that he gives, because he was concerned mainly with the lives of people engaged in arduous manual labour. Consequently he sees

All life moving to one measure—
Daily bread, daily bread---

the 'hand-to-mouth' life. Much of his poetry is unlovely with the unloveliness of the subjects he chose, but it belongs to the first quarter of the twentieth century as the work of no other poet does. It is murky, wrapped in a pall of smoke, and lit by the glare of furnaces and the glow of white-hot metal:

The great, red eyes . . .
They burn me through and through.
They glare upon me all night long;
They never sleep;
But always glower on me.
They never even blink;
But stare, and stare . . .¹

Gibson is essentially the laureate of modern industrialism, though an unexultant laureate who tells chiefly of a man-made hell of machines and creatures of the machines. Gibson may be seen as the Hogarth of contemporary poetry in *Geraniums*,² where he depicts

A poor old weary woman . . .
Broken with lust and drink, blear-eyed and ill,
Her battered bonnet nodding on her head.

¹ *The Furnace (Daily Bread)*, 1910.

² *Georgian Poetry (I)*.

The furnace fires of Gibson are in striking contrast to the almost chilly austerity of John Freeman (1880-1929), a contributor to the last three volumes of *Georgian Poetry*. Though Freeman, like several of his fellow-poets, wrote a good deal about Beauty, he did not appear ever to be really in touch with her. In his case the reason is plain, for he regarded Beauty as his own creation:

It was my eyes, Beauty, that made thee bright;
It was my ears that heard, the blood in my veins,
The vehemence of transfiguring thought—
Not lights and shadows, birds, grasses and rains—
That made thy wonders wonderful.¹

It may be true that Beauty dwells in the eye of the beholder, but she reveals herself in response to an instinctive act of faith rather than to 'the vehemence of transfiguring thought'. John Freeman's phrase is, however, significant of that intellectual approach which caused some twentieth-century poets to believe that Beauty could be manufactured, or caused to materialize, from the mere conjunction of poetic romantically pictorial epithets.

James Elroy Flecker (born at Lewisham, London, in 1884) was the eldest child of Dr. Flecker, afterwards headmaster of Dean Close School, Cheltenham, where the boy was educated before going to Oxford. After a period as a school-teacher, J. E. Flecker entered the diplomatic service, and thereafter, with intervals of leave for ill health, was posted to various Consulates in the Near East. He died at Davos, Switzerland, on January 3, 1915.² Following the objective methods of Leconte de Lisle, Hérédia, and other modern French poets of the 'Parnassian' school, Flecker eschewed personal and emotional poetry, and (as he said) wrote 'with the single intention of creating beauty.'³ Except in his Oriental play, *Hassan* (1922), he rarely got beyond the stage of experimentation in verse. *Hassan*, a

¹ *Discovery: Georgian Poetry* (III).

² See J. C. Squire's introduction to *The Collected Poems of James Elroy Flecker* (1916).

³ *Ibid.*

store of poetic delights, will probably be cherished longer for its lyrics than for dramatic qualities. The London production of *Hassan* was a beautiful spectacle, but apart from the stage pictures and the enchanting lyrics the play was tedious, and had, moreover, touches of that sensual cruelty¹ which became a recurrent feature of imaginative writing in England round about the nineteen-twenties. The songs from *Hassan* are included in the *Collected Poems*, where they appear like gems torn from their setting; the setting is far from perfect, but it displays these jewels to advantage. In Hassan's song to Yasmin (Act I, Sc. 2), *The War Song of the Saracens* (Act III, Sc. 3), and *The Golden Road to Samarkand*, Flecker came as near as he ever did to his 'single intention of creating beauty'. It may be doubted again, however, whether so deliberate a quest of beauty can be successful. Flecker's verse was too closely acquainted with the paint pot and the perfume jar.

The human spirit seeks, from age to age, to free itself from the intolerable bondage of its own civilization; to escape from the hell of complication to the heaven of simple things. Blake found a way out, though no one else has followed him to the end of his path; Wordsworth found another way out—by 'returning to Nature'; and in the twentieth century Walter de la Mare found a different way—by a return to the direct vision of childhood. He is not (except incidentally) a children's poet. If his vision is that of a child, his imagination and intellect are always fully adult. This does not mean that his poems are not for children. Children enjoy them, as children enjoy Blake's *Songs of Innocence*. But charming innocence is not the whole content of *Peacock Pie* or any other of de la Mare's books. He is, as Blake often was, a master in the art of understatement—taking the world and calling it a grain of sand. Blake's *Tiger*, *Tiger* has a divine incomprehensibility

¹ This sadistic strain is more strongly suggested in Rafi's whisper to Pervaneh (and the dialogue following), Act IV, Sc. 2, than displayed in the Procession of Protracted Death.

behind its external simplicity. And who would care to say that a similar divine incomprehensibility does not lie in a score of de la Mare's poems?—in *Tillie*, *Miss T.*, *Hide and Seek*:¹

Hide and seek, say I,
To myself and step
Out of the dream of Wake
Into the dream of Sleep.

Walter de la Mare's poems are, mostly, on a single subject: *the dream of Wake*. In that dream, natural and supernatural become one, as muffins and mutton and Miss T. become one; the poet sees the future in the instant, and all experience comes to him preternaturally sharpened and free from mental fog. It is doubtful whether de la Mare, even if he were persuaded to set himself to the task, could produce a long poem. But any such inability would not be traceable to deficiency in power of sustained effort. Rather it would be because there is nothing in heaven or earth that comes to his vision veiled in sufficient complexity to fill out a poem of anything approaching epic length. He has written in *The Scribe*² about the subject of all great verse—God and Man and the universe. Milton made ten thousand lines on the theme; de la Mare makes twenty-six lines only. In the 'dream of Wake' he sees the universe as a map laid out; he sees its immensity at a glance; he knows that all Time is not long enough to catalogue what he sees. Why write epics, when an epic can no more justify the ways of God than a lyric can? Why write epics, when a lyric may equally well suggest the boundless and inexhaustible immensity of the works of God?—

. . . still would remain
My wit to try—. . .
All words forgotten—
Thou, Lord, and I.

Walter de la Mare was born at Charlton, Kent, in 1873. Educated at St. Paul's Cathedral School, he worked in a

¹ All in *Peacock Pie* (1913).

² In *Molloy* (1918).

business house in the City of London for some years before it became possible for him to devote himself wholly to literature. His first poems, *Songs of Childhood* (1902), are delightful in themselves, and also interesting as embodying qualities that came to be recognized as characteristic excellences of his poetry. The subtle and varied metrical music was already in process of development; and he was already a poet of silences and shy solitary creatures. In later volumes he frequently reached perfection of workmanship rarely equalled in twentieth-century verse. An example of this (though not perhaps the best example) may be seen in *The Horseman*,¹ a poem as cunningly wrought and shaped as a silver figure by Benvenuto Cellini. De la Mare's exquisite craftsmanship does not betray him into preoccupation with mere artifice; nor does the dream quality of his verse separate him from consciousness of reality. He is never unaware of 'the smooth-plumed bird . . . the seed of the grass, the speck of stone . . . the wayfaring ant', nor of 'fetlocked horses' and bony, knobble-kneed donkeys. He walks on the common earth, interested in a hundred things besides literature. His imagination is fed upon more substantial fare than honeydew; and though he may frequently be in company with fairies and witches, it is doubtful whether he has ever discovered to us a more delightful or more 'ordinary' companion than his lovable mangy donkey, *Nicholas Nye*.²

The post-war poems of Siegfried Sassoon (e.g., *The Heart's Journey*, 1928, and *Vigils*, 1935) were delicate and reticently reflective, with a lovely suggestion of far-away muted music. Harold Monro, besides editing *Georgian Poetry*, was himself a poet who progressed from the pleasantly fanciful to a series of poems in which there is deeper thought and troubled feeling (*Collected Poems*, 1933).

The names of many writers appearing in *Georgian Poetry* have been omitted from this section, and not all the omissions are due to lack of space. Most of the Georgians

¹ In *Peacock Pie*.

² *Ibid.*

were able to assemble the raw materials of poetry—moons, rivers, ships, hills, colours, flowers, birds, buds, summer nights, dusky passions, and so forth—but few of them were sufficiently aware that poetry is more than the assembling and pretty arrangement of poetic material.

§ 6. *Nature Poetry*

Rupert Brooke's services to twentieth-century poetry did not end with his death. He left legacies to three of his fellow-writers, with the intention of enabling them to apply themselves more single-heartedly to poetry. He was aware that daily drudgery left several contemporary authors with their minds only half free for poetry; and that English literature would probably have suffered if Milton had been tied to minor journalism, Wordsworth to insurance policies, and Tennyson to the buying and selling of oil. The demands of business (which did in fact stifle some promising Georgian writers) were to some extent responsible for the double-edged epithet 'The Week-end School'—applied to the Poetry Bookshop group. When these poets wrote of Nature, they wrote as town-dwellers who met Nature only from Saturdays to Mondays, rather than as men who knew her in all moods. Poetry, for many of its lovers, could be only an occasional indulgence, and those who had little time for observation and meditation (possible to 'dedicated souls' in the past) drifted against their own better judgment into the use of a poetic diction, less restricted perhaps than that of the eighteenth century, but equally monotonous.

A few poets succeeded—for a time, at least—in avoiding the handicaps borne by the Week-end School, and as nearly as any one might in such circumstances as his, William Henry Davies dedicated himself to poetry. He saw the external world with a blessedly uncultured eye and wrote about it, for the most part, in 'non-literary' verse.

The story of his early life is told in *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* (1908). Born in Newport, Monmouthshire,

in 1870, he had a restless and lawless youth, afterwards living as a tramp and very casual worker in America and England until he was thirty-seven. During a quiet period in youth, while apprenticed to a picture-frame maker, Davies 'composed and caused to be printed a poem describing a storm at night, which a young friend recited at a mutual improvement class'. Years later, after losing his right foot while 'jumping' a railway train in Canada, he turned again to poetry, and in a public lodging-house in South London composed a blank verse tragedy, *The Robber*. When this had been rejected by two managers, he wrote a long narrative poem, a hundred sonnets, 'another tragedy, a comedy, a volume of humorous essays, and hundreds of short poems'.¹ After further wanderings and privations he accumulated £19, the sum required to publish a book of fifty poems² at his own risk. Review copies sent out by the printer produced only two brief notices in provincial papers. Davies then began to post copies to well-known people, inviting them to send him the price of the book. Some did so, and attention was drawn slowly to his poems. Long articles began to appear in the London papers, journalists interviewed and photographed him, and he became a figure in twentieth-century poetry.

In the few early pieces retained in the *Collected Poems* (1916) there is evidence that Davies distrusted his own ability, and had then a more marked tendency than he shows elsewhere to lean upon stereotyped practices in verse. The 'artless simplicity' of his later work was easy game for parodists, yet, in those characteristic poems, Davies displayed a more pleasing and distinctive quality than in such a stanza as the following:

I would that drowsy June awhile were here,
 'The amorous South wind carrying all the vale--
 Save that white lily true to star as pale,
 Whose secret day-dream Phoebus burns to hear.³

¹ *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp*: ch. XXI.

² *The Soul's Destroyer and Other Poems* (1907).

³ *Autumn*, from *The Soul's Destroyer*.

Although the second-hand furniture of conventional verse lumbers up the lines here, to produce poetry of any worthy kind was an achievement in circumstances such as Davies describes in *The Lodging-House Fire*, a verse transcription of experiences related in the *Autobiography* (Ch. XXVII). Like Herrick, W. H. Davies is a poet of extreme accomplishment and sophistication, wrapped in a deceptive aura of simplicity. His poetry has more moods than one, but it was his sheep and grass and cloudlets that were most refreshing to a jaded world:

When I came forth this morn I saw
Quite twenty cloudlets in the air;
And then I saw a flock of sheep,
Which told me how those clouds came there.

That flock of sheep on that green grass,
Well might it lie so still and proud!
Its likeness had been drawn in heaven,
On a blue sky, in silvery cloud.¹

Though his acute sensibilities are displayed chiefly in enumeration of the smaller delights of the countryside—sights and sounds and odours—Davies is sensible to the menace of the dark wing that Life spreads above multitudes of creatures. Allowing for obvious metrical diversity, Thomas Hardy might have written the following lines in which Davies describes the effects made upon him by cities:

When I am in those great places,
I see ten thousand suffering faces;
Before me stares a wolfish eye,
Behind me creeps a groan or sigh.²

But whereas Hardy sought persistently in Nature for analogies to compel attention to the 'ten thousand suffering faces' of mankind and 'the long drip of human tears', Davies flies to Nature for solace and forgetfulness, pursuing Joy, eschewing Sadness.³ The central fact in his poetry is

¹ *The Likeness* (*New Poems*).

² *In the Country* (from *Farewell to Poetry*).

³ See *Songs of Joy and Sadness and Joy*.

not that he sees little more than externals, but that he is grateful to Nature for hanging her lovely veil between his susceptibilities and the world's pain. He learned in his wandering years what lies at the back of that veil; and in later life preferred to look no further than its exquisite surface-pattern. For him, to attempt to reduce Nature to a philosophical system would be to succumb to that barren earnestness and purposiveness against which he protests interrogatively in *Leisure*—his apology for idlers: Beauty may have a soul to be sought; meanwhile, she certainly has a body to be admired, and—

A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.¹

Edward Thomas (born 1878; educated at St. Paul's and Oxford) published his first book when he was nineteen, and for the next twenty years wrote and edited numerous works in prose. He joined the Army and was killed in France in 1917, and in that year appeared the earliest collection of poems under his own name. As 'Edward Eastaway' he had published a few poems previously, but readers were not prepared for the revelation of Edward Thomas as a poet equal to the best of his contemporaries. He is entirely original, and his originality is itself strangely original, though there is nothing freakish, either in manner or matter. The sense of 'newness' given by his poetry comes from a feeling that it is written by one whose vision and music are free from lights and echoes of others' work. Though Thomas was a reader and critic of poetry, he neither 'followed' nor 'reacted'. He sang as though he were the first and only poet in the world, and there is a curious absence of conscious literary effort in his choice of material. This casualness (if it may be so called) is suggested in Thomas's indifference to titles. Many of his poems have for heading the first half-line (e.g., *How at once*), as though each was written to relieve the mind in

¹ *Leisure* (*Songs of Joy*).

song, not to state a theme. His instrument is not a harp, nor a trumpet, nor an organ; it is a divine penny whistle, full of delicate, half-sweet, half-troubled music. He speaks of a boy, hidden in a thicket, who

Slowly and surely playing
On a whistle an olden nursery melody,
Says far more than I am saying.¹

But Thomas's own whistle says more than he may have been aware. It also says more than others can realize until they become attuned to its strange cadences. Paper and print are no benediction to Edward Thomas's poetry; the woodland and his own little pipe are needed in place of book and pen. His poems (more than most) require to be memorized and spoken.

In 1925 Edmund Blunden was still a poet of promise. He had written verse so good in its kind as to arouse strong hopes that he would be an outstanding figure in the second quarter of the century. Both Davies and Thomas, though intimate with Nature, were more detached than any thoroughgoing Nature poet can be. Blunden, on the other hand, completely identified himself with Nature, whether in the mire and soggy wetness of a November day in the Kentish fields, or

When the morning ripens and unfolds
Like beds of flowers the glories of the plain.²

His real achievement is, in fact, that he does not insist on keeping Nature out of sight until her toilette is completed and she is decked out for the public eye. He is as devoted to her in her dishevelment as when she appears in stately robes, and this is a mark of the truth in his pastoral poetry.

* His first book of verse, *Pastorals*, was published in 1916, a few months after he left school (Christ's Hospital) to take a commission in the Army. War service in France, a

¹ *The Penny Whistle*.

² *The Shepherd*.

long sea voyage (in 1921-22),¹ and a period as lecturer in English literature at Tokyo University provided Blunden with varied experiences, but the dominant note in his poetry up to 1925 remained true to *The Preamble of Pastorals*:

I sing of the rivers and hamlets and woodlands of Sussex and Kent,
Such as I know them: I found a delight wherever I went,
By plat and by hatch, through acres of hops or of corn.

His master then was Clare (1793-1864), the Northamptonshire poet, and these two share the distinction of writing perhaps the best 'winter poetry' in English. There has been much talk in verse about bright frosty winter days, but the drab saturation of winter (though less picturesque) is equally true and equally English—and Blunden is completely English. He was, perhaps, too good a poet at the beginning. If *The Waggoner* had appeared in 1930 instead of 1920, and had followed a series of inferior volumes, his admirers might have been more content. As it was, he filled the prose of his *Undertones of War* (1928) with the essence of poetry, and in the poems placed as an appendix to the book seemed not to maintain the splendid level of the prose. Throughout his *English Poems* (1925) there is no ease of utterance, no smoothness, no untroubled melody. Blunden was never a Nature poet in the narrow sense of being content to paint external appearances; but in the later poems there is a stronger infusion of those non-physical elements from his own being which he endeavours to incorporate with Nature's likeness. His poetry 'is not the fruit of facility. I strive for utterance', he says.² And he speaks of its 'half-ideals, verges of shadows and misty brightness'. This difficult wrestling of the poet with his material no doubt explains why his verse gives such a sense of thwarted achievement—as if some obstruction impeded the fulfilment of genius; an impression to some extent confirmed by the address *To Nature*:

¹ See *The Bonadventure* (1922), a record of the voyage.

² Preface to *English Poems*.

O my stern mother, aye, in that name loved,
 Who gave me life and all its greenest fields,
 And yet to counterchange the simple joy
 Gave me this brain, whose luck it seems to be
 Ever to labour like a winnowing drudge,
 But blind, unknowing if it beat in vain. . . .

Victoria Sackville-West—first in her *Orchard and Vineyard* (1921) and later in *The Land* (1926), a long descriptive and meditative poem which does solidly for the Weald of Kent what Edmund Blunden might have done more brilliantly, though hardly with the same singleness of purpose. *The Land* attempts no more than is within its author's power to achieve confidently. The persistent and inestimable commonplaces of the English country seasonal round are surveyed by an observer saturated in the essence of England. She has no patent philosophical purpose and does not strive after any metaphysical vision. The earth to her is earth, beautiful enough but an exacting mistress:

the man who works the wet and weeping soil
 Down in the Weald, must marl and delve and till
 His three-horse land, fearing nor sweat nor droil.
 For through the winter he must fight the flood,
 The clay, that yellow enemy, that rots
 His land, sucks at his horses' hooves
 So that his waggon plunges in the mud,
 And wheels revolve, but waggon never moves. . . .

Maurice Hewlett's *Song of the Plow* (1916) is an admirable minor epic of the English agricultural labourer; *The Land* is an unsentimentalized record of the English farmer's year, *felt* as the practical farmer would feel it, rather than seen as a romantic town-dweller might attempt to see it: 'the land' of day-labour, not of week-ends and summer holidays.

§ 7. *Innovators and Others*

At the close of the first quarter of the twentieth century there were a score or two of competent verse-makers whose publications continued to be received with attention by the critics. Scarcely more than half a dozen of these seemed likely, however, to produce verse with the exciting quality of unexpectedness that belongs to true poetry. Such of the Georgians as continued to be productive were pottering about in pleasant and well-tended literary back-gardens, cultivating the same poetic varieties as had given colour to the narrow landscape ten years before. There is little need, at any time, for poets to be startlingly 'new', either in form or substance; yet, though few great poets are anti-traditional, they impart to tradition and commonplace a spirit that transforms tidy back-gardens of thought and imagery into majestic and limitless expanses. If poetry does not (for both poet and reader) smash through the walls of the imprisoning universe of self and give entrance into new countries—whether beautiful or terrifying—poetry might as well not be written. Nothing is so disturbing in poetry as the quality of incomprehensibility; but it is doubtful whether any poet of the first rank has entirely avoided or desired to avoid this quality. Incomprehensibility (not to be confused with incoherence: God is incomprehensible—He is not incoherent) is a quality present in even the 'simple' poems of the great poets. Though it may not be a something that is finally and for ever incomprehensible, it is at least a necessary something that produces exquisite growing-pains of the mind and spirit. Inability to suggest anything beyond the immediately comprehensible facts of existence was a fatal limitation in most of the Georgian poetry: it provided no enlargement of experience.

Robert Graves was one of the few who escaped from the back-garden tradition. He found himself in a large and bewildering (but somehow satisfying) wilderness, where familiar things are strange and new:

The evening air comes cold,
The sunset scatters gold,
Small grasses toss and bend,
Small pathways idly tend
Towards no certain end.¹

It was because Robert Graves's poetry tended 'towards no certain end' that it was well worth considering. The paths of Graves's mind were as bafflingly full of promise as the paths of an English wood, where the wayfarer is in a state of continuous expectation: anything may appear round the next corner.

'Like a storm of sand I run
Breaking the desert's boundaries;
I go in hiding from the sun
In thick shade of trees.

'Straight was the track I took
Across the plains, but here with briar
And mire the tangled alleys crook,
Baulking desire. . . .'

An illuminating index to Robert Graves's mind is provided by the poem called *In Procession*, where, having spoken of the qualities and powers of

The poets of old
Each with his pen of gold
Gloriously writing,²

he proceeds to indicate the abundance of material in his own 'teeming mind': children's rhymes, strange tongues and stranger shapes, land and sea and heaven and hell, all history and all religion. But the poet's task is not only to *possess*; it is, also, to *present*:

Could I show them so to you
That you saw them with me,
Oh then, then I could be

¹ *An English Wood*. In the version of this piece given in *Collected Poems*, 1938, the last line reads 'Towards no fearful end.'

² *Unicorn and the White Doe*, *Collected Poems*.

The Prince of Poetry
With never a peer,
Seeing my way so clear
To unveil the mystery.¹

The poet had had 'marvellous hope of achievement', but also (and on these words the poem closes) 'deceiving and bereavement of this same hope'. To read Robert Graves's poetry then was to feel that one was assisting him to wrestle with Chaos. The Foreword to the *Collected Poems* (1938) is largely a repudiation of Graves's earlier work in verse and prose; he acknowledges his inclination to dwell upon 'discomfort and terror', and remarks, 'I should say that my health as a poet lies in my mistrust of the comfortable point-of-rest.'

Robert Graves's treatise *On English Poetry* (1922)—is a sane and sound piece of criticism—neither slavishly traditional nor hurriedly emancipated. At that time the claims of 'free verse' were being advocated, and in a section devoted to *vers libre*, Graves approved the attitude of a friend who 'denied that there was such a thing as *vers libre* possible, arguing beyond refutation that if it was *vers* it couldn't be truly *libre* and if it was truly *libre* it couldn't possibly come under the category of *vers*'. Since the successes and failures of Whitman in America and Henley in England with free verse-forms, unmetrical and unrhymed verse has been tried by many. When a definite rhythmical current is substituted for metre, free verse can be made both pleasing and impressive, but the chief objection to be met is the difficulty of distinguishing between free verse and prose. Probably the only satisfactory means of deciding whether the necessary distinction has been preserved, is to listen sympathetically to *vers libre* read aloud sympathetically by a competent reader. Unless the ear can detect that what is being spoken is definitely not prose, it is useless to maintain that such writing has any advantage over plain prose. But free verse at its best, as in Whitman,

¹ These lines are deleted in the *Collected Poems* version.

makes a great deal of metrical verse seem, by comparison, a mere tinkle.

The merits and possibilities of *vers libre* were revived as the subject of a good deal of short-tempered controversy after the war of 1914-18, when the Sitwell family (Edith, Osbert, and Sacheverell) set up as leaders of an anti-traditional movement. If the Sitwells had been less hardy controversialists, they would have been laughed into silence; but their minds were more suitably armoured than those of their opponents. They had wit, command of an aggressive vocabulary, and unbounded self-confidence. Consequently they attracted a following, and compelled silence even where they failed to win admiration.

The Sitwells were not wedded to *vers libre*, though they flirted with it. Their revolt went further. A succinct negative statement of their aims was given by Osbert Sitwell: 'You cannot write well in the idiom of the day before yesterday.'¹ They were impatient and scornful of the equipment of the traditional poets, as they would have been of any one who offered them a sedan-chair from South Kensington Museum when they required an aeroplane from Croydon. They demanded both an idiom and a form suitable for the reflection and expression of twentieth-century minds. The argument was not that twentieth-century minds are better than those of any other century, but only that they are *different*—as aeroplanes are different from sedan-chairs.

Edith Sitwell's world is full of hard, bright-coloured objects; everything is objectified, and abstractions are banished. It is a world of things, not of thoughts; yet at the same time it is a world of sensations, rather than of appearances. Objects and scenes are often robbed of their visual quality, in order that they may be given a *sensation quality*. The reader is expected to receive an impression of things—not through descriptions that enable him to recognize them as things known by sight, but by an

¹ *Who Killed Cock Robin?* (1921).

application of epithets designed to revive the sensations previously experienced in contact with similar objects, or in similar circumstances. *Aubade*¹ is a simple example of this method:

Jane, Jane,
Tall as a crane,
The morning light creaks down again.
Comb your cockscomb-ragged hair;
Jane, Jane, come down the stair.

Each dull blunt wooden stalactite
Of rain creaks, hardened by the light . . .

The frowsy appearance of a lank domestic servant roused at early morning is suggested in the second and fourth lines above, and elsewhere in the unquoted part of the poem; and the third, sixth, and seventh lines attempt to re-create in the reader the sensations produced by a dismal wet morning upon a person reluctantly awakening to resume menial duties. Edith Sitwell's verse is too varied to be comprehended in a single category. It has occasional echoes of older poetry—the traditional ballads, Donne, the Augustans, Wilde, and others.² Of beauty there is little; it is elbowed out by a succession of vivid fashion-plate pictures alternating with kaleidoscope designs.

Sacheverell Sitwell had no special eccentricities of his own, and, of the three, was perhaps nearest to being a normal poet. Osbert Sitwell did his best work in a series of satirical character-sketches in *vers libre* (occasionally varied by rhymed passages). He also produced some successful poems in the impressionistic mode favoured by his sister. In the following extract from *Giardino Pubbico* the sensations of heat, and then of coolness and silence, are skilfully suggested:

Petunias in mass formation,
An angry rose, a hard carnation,

¹ *Bucolic Comedies* (1923).

² See, e.g., *The Mother* (1915) reprinted in *Rustic Elegies* (1927).

Hot yellow grass, a yellow palm
 Rising, giraffe-like, into calm,
 All these glare hotly in the sun.
 Behind are woods where shadows run
 Like water through the dripping shade
 That leaves and laughing winds have made.
 Here silence like a silver bird
 Pecks at the droning heat.¹

Experiments on somewhat similar lines to those carried out by the Sitwells had been begun in England and America round about 1914 by a group of verse-writers who took the name of Imagists. These, too, shunned abstractions; they also aimed at utmost economy of words, and reduced poetic ornament to a minimum. They wished to produce poems with the sharpness of outline and precision of form which belong to a perfectly proportioned statuette or other carved image: 'An "Image"', they said, 'is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.' Richard Aldington, F. S. Flint, and Ezra Pound were the leaders of the group, but the ablest was H. D. (Hilda Doolittle—Mrs. Aldington), who, in a number of poems, succeeded in crystallizing in a moment of time a beautifully moulded image, as in this passage (from *Loss*²) describing a young Greek warrior:

I marvelled at your height.

You stood almost level
 with the lance-bearers
 and so slight.

And I wondered as you clasped
 your shoulder-strap
 at the strength of your wrist
 and the turn of your young fingers,
 and the lift of your shorn locks,
 and the bronze
 of your sun-burnt neck.

¹ First version, 1922. Reprinted (revised) in *Out of the Flame* (1923).

² In *Sea Garden* (1916).

A broader track was followed by Humbert Wolfe (1885-1939), who was overpraised for *News of the Devil* (1926) and *Requiem* (1927). *Requiem*, a linked series of dramatic lyrics, was his least blemished work. Though he several times aimed at tragedy, he missed the final austerity and stopped short at the romantico-tragic. He was a sentimentalist for the unsentimental.

The poems of Charles Williams received warm praise from Alice Meynell, Sir Walter Raleigh, Robert Bridges, and others of equal discernment. His sonnet sequence *The Silver Stair* (1912) is among the few examples of sustained love poetry in the early twentieth century, and its beauty and exaltation are less impeded than some of his later poems by a disposition to treat human love as a sub-department of theology and philosophy. In *The Silver Stair* the young poet and lover was stronger than the young-old theologian and philosopher, and the result is a series of love sonnets comparable with the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* in imaginative quality, though more intellectualized than Elizabeth Browning's.

The later poems of Charles Williams¹ are exceptionally interesting for their diversity of mood, and the manner in which the poet's mind ranges at large over the world and the universe beyond: at one moment addressing his own feet:²

Consider, feet, to how great lineage ye
Arc kin, the serfs of climbing Hannibal
And they who friended Nelson on his sea;
Think to what stools and stairways temporal
Your strong and slender brethren have drawn nigh,
Caesar's to Rome, Moses' to Sinai;—

at another, writing a child's *Walking Song*:³

Here we go a-walking, so softly, so softly,
Down the world, round the world, back to London town,

¹ *Poems of Conformity* (1917), *Divorce* (1920), *Windows of Night* (1925), *Taliessin in Logres* (1939).

² *Chant Royal of Feet (Divorce)*.

³ In *Windows of Night*.

To see the waters and the whales, the emus and the mandarins,
To see the Chinese mandarins, each in a silken gown;—

and at a third, expressing spiritual ecstacy in the contemplation of Love:

‘My Lord and God,’ cried he,
A hundred, yea, five hundred thoughts and dreams
At once behold the light that from him streams.
I ove, in a single cloud of radiant dust,
Love, from this earth’s austerity or lust,
Love, from the place of shades doleful and dim,
Love is arisen, and we are risen with him.
With him are risen, who is by us adored,
Our Child, our Son, our Destiny, our Lord!¹

Charles Williams is akin to Donne and other seventeenth-century metaphysical poets in attributing a religious value to love and attaching to it a theological language. He is so instinctively and continuously a poet—complex in thought and ecclesiastical in temper—that no division can be made between his works in poetry, drama (the verse plays *A Myth of Shakespeare*, 1928; *Granmer of Canterbury*, 1936; *The Rite of the Passion*, 1929; etc.), fiction, criticism, and biography.

§ 8. *The New Metaphysicals*

The disruption produced between 1914 and 1918 by the war might not of itself have unseated Romanticism, which had prevailed in literature and in the general conduct of life since the last years of the eighteenth century. It was post-war economic and spiritual depression, and deepening dejection in a world impermeable to optimistic idealism in the nineteen-thirties, that at length overthrew the Romantics and brought in a generation of writers of whom some desired a revival of classicism, others a new era in which the scientific spirit of the modern world should be exalted over all else, while yet others (probably the

¹ *The Christian Year (Poems of Conformity)*.

majority) attended at the rebirth of the metaphysical temper which had been dormant in English poetry since the seventeenth century. These new metaphysicals were frequently as crabbed and tortuous in expression as the least luminous of their long-ago predecessors, and they displayed an equivalent preoccupation with death. But whereas salvation through Christ and damnation through sin were the alpha and omega of John Donne and of the Puritans, salvation through Marx and damnation through capitalism were the twentieth-century substitutes. The Communist Manifesto displaced the Thirty-Nine Articles. Yet, though economics and dialectical materialism were terms persistent in current phraseology, their users cast doubt upon the validity of the words by attaching to them a significance that was far more mystical than rational.

There had been intermediate stages, however.

The first volume of poems by T. S. Eliot (born 1888) was published in 1917, *Prufrock and other Observations*, but it was not until 1922, when *The Waste Land* appeared, that he became a recognized force in poetry, compacting in that poem of some four hundred lines 'an interpretation of a whole condition of society'.¹ Eliot was born in America, but after about ten years of residence in England became a British subject, having developed a typically American reverence for British institutions, especially for the Anglican Church. His earlier poems had expressed—as much in the dryness of their form as in their subject-matter—a mood of despair in regard to contemporary civilization, and the poet was obviously facing divergent roads, one leading to the ultimate denial of good in the universe, the other to the refuge of Christian hope. Subsequent writings made it clear that Eliot had become the foremost Christian poet of his day and, in his prose, one of the leading Christian apologists. While at Harvard, at the Paris Sorbonne, and at Oxford, his studies had been both extensive and intensive, philosophy and languages (Eastern as well as Western)

¹ F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*, 1930.

taking a principal place. Eliot's devotion to traditional culture, the extent and depth of his knowledge, his use in poetry of modern imagery and modern idiom, and his compression in statement, present the reader of Eliot's poetry with an intertwining complexity. The notes to *The Waste Land* show how vain it would be for 'the average man' to pretend to grasp the poem intellectually, and show, too, how far away poetry had travelled from Wordsworth's ideal of simplicity and intelligibility. Eliot it was who was chiefly instrumental in leading poets back to Donne, not as an imitator, but as bringing a Donne-like mind and spiritual apprehension to bear upon the contemporary world, and re-establishing the 'conceits' of the metaphysicals in modern dress. But whereas Donne's imagination was invariably passionate and consuming, Eliot's was often anaemic and chill.

The young poets of the new generation felt the influence of Eliot strongly, and also that of an earlier poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-89), whose poems were not issued before his death and only became widely known after his friend Robert Bridges edited a collected edition in 1918. Hopkins, a Jesuit and sometime Professor of Greek at Dublin University, was a strikingly original technical innovator in verse, and the beauties of his poetry are involved with much intellectual complexity which of itself appealed to young minds almost despairingly conscious of the complexity of the civilization into which they were born, and of which they desired to be interpreters to the masses. 'Poetry for the Workers' became at once an ideal and a cant phrase, for poetry, unless it is diluted to the point at which it becomes the doggerel vehicle of sentiment, rarely interests the masses—though among the masses as well as among the classes there are a few to whom poetry is a necessity. For these, poetry *qua* poetry suffices; to these, 'Poetry for the Workers' is an impertinent snob-phrase.

The poetry of the nineteen-thirties was saturated in the

bloody sweat of that decade. This fact gives it a documentary importance which may seem, as time passes, to outweigh its poetic merit. It was symptomatic rather than prophylactic. The poet turned politician may serve his age as politician, but he may in so doing abrogate his incomparably more important function as visionary. While no poet can be unaware of temporalities, he is poet only in so far as he is in constant touch also with the eternities, applying to policy the measure of Truth.

W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis, and Louis MacNeice received the largest share of attention among the poets of the nineteen-thirties. Their work with that of numerous others is illustrated in two representative anthologies of the period: *New Signatures* (1932) and *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936), both with illuminating introductions by Michael Roberts.

No generation has been apt or adroit in assessing the ultimate value (as distinct from the immediate utilitarian significance) of the writings of its contemporaries, and the obstacles in the way of a mature and settled judgment are more than commonly weighty in the modern period. The determined adoption of locutions special to the machine age (and, in some quarters, of a phraseology almost private in character) leaves the critic groping for a standard of reference which only the future can provide. Poetry until now had remained for the most part still rooted in the pastoral life and still with strong attachments to the traditional heroic ages. The imagery of lyrical poetry underwent little fundamental change from Theocritus to Tennyson, while in epic there is no unpassable gulf between Homer and Milton. Yet though nowadays it may still be possible to talk of origins and influences—as, e.g., those of Donne and Skelton—linking the present-day poet with some among his forerunners, the material utilized by the characteristic poets of the nineteen-thirties differs as much from the familiar material of the pastoral ages as duralumin differs from gold; and each of these has a special

fitness for its own particular functions. So, at the moment, how shall we decide as between pylons and poplars, between cantilever bridges and crystallised branches, between our sirens and the other kind, between the aeroplane and the albatross? In the ages of faith the question might have been settled with the confident assertion that things of permanence must be preferred to those that are transitory. But though we may hope, who would now declare without a doubt that the poplar will outlast the pylon? And if the criterion of judgment is to be sought in an abstract standard of beauty, what assurance have we that in the present or in the future a majority would agree that an albatross is more beautiful than an aeroplane. The shrinkage and decay of the pastoral life and its correspondences may, at least for a prolonged period, detach man from nature, so that (except for a few antiquarians) poetry about man's creations would be far more intelligible and thus, presumably, more acceptable than poetry about God's creation.

At the moment it appears to at least one reader that the material of much recent contemporary poetry is barren and boring, and that a thin whimper has displaced both the song of joy and the strong cry of agony. T. S. Eliot has written (in *The Hollow Men*):

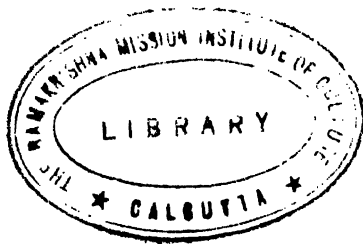
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.

If this should prove to be our epitaph, the doomful twittering that agitated much of the poetry of the 'thirties will have been justified.

Comment on individual poets of this decade can have little point, for, as more than one critic has noted, their voices lack individuality. But differences of quality can nevertheless be detected and, more especially, differences in the degree of ease with which they accommodate themselves to the modernist manner. Day Lewis's *Now the*

full-throated daffodils appears to be nearer to an instinctive utterance than some of his determinedly mechanistic pieces. Louis MacNeice's *Autumn Journal* (1939) proffers thrilling intimations of genuine poetry entangled in masses of topical allusions that call for another tangle of footnotes. Stephen Spender, though he has been pointed to¹ as an indication of how much better a poet Rupert Brooke might have been if he had been brought up in Spender's day and environment, hardly disguises a romantico-sentimental mind of smaller dimensions than Brooke's. Of the leading poets in this group, W. H. Auden alone appears to have found a natural personal language in the modern idiom and to be capable of accepting its restrictive conventions without sacrifice of poetic stature. While MacNeice is a good poet when he escapes from the limitations of modernism, Auden is as often a good poet while within its confines. Some of his best poetry is in the plays written in collaboration with Christopher Isherwood: *The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1935), *The Ascent of F6* (1936), *On the Frontier* (1938).

¹ Introduction to *New Verse* (1939), an anthology edited by Geoffrey Grigson.



CHAPTER V

ESSAYISTS AND CRITICS

§ 1. *Max Beerbohm*

MAX BEERBOHM began, in the middle of the eightennineties, with a little book of less than two hundred pages, exquisitely printed, in which a rivulet of text meandered through a meadow of margin. This was published—the *first* of his books—as *The Works of Max Beerbohm*, (1896). He was then twenty-four years old. Following the *Works* came several volumes of prose, and also his coloured cartoons, witty and delicate examples of the art of caricature. But though it was as 'Max' the caricaturist that he became widely known, his literary excellence gave the caricatures their unique touch. Nearly every picture bears, in minute handwriting, a fragment of the artist's jewelled prose, and the effect of these phrases upon current foibles and follies was as incisive as a diamond upon thin glass.

In *Zuleika Dobson* (1911) Max Beerbohm wrote an Oxford love-story unlike all other love-stories. Zuleika is superb. She had been a conjurer—an appallingly clumsy third-rate conjurer; but she is so beautiful that all Oxford fell in love with her—and all Oxford committed suicide because of hopeless unrequited passion! This joyous book is brilliantly loaded with irony and satire, and the coping-stone to the whole crazy, mad, sublime structure is in the last few lines. Zuleika had desolated Oxford: the halls of the colleges were empty, its quadrangles silent, its lecture-rooms more than ever deserted. Zuleika, however, sighed for other worlds to conquer, and on the last page of the book she is ordering a special train—for Cambridge. . . .

When Bernard Shaw retired from the *Saturday Review* in 1898, Max Beerbohm succeeded him as dramatic critic. Almost everything he wrote or drew shows clearly the acute and penetrating critic behind the playful exquisite,

though his critical penetration was not seen fully until *A Christmas Garland* (1912) set the fashion for a revival of the art of parody, which brought in J. C. Squire, E. V. Knox, J. B. Priestley, and others. For some years before the appearance of *A Christmas Garland*, parody had been looked upon as a debased type of writing. That misconception was due to the lack of any parodist of genius, for parody may be (as at its best it cannot fail to be) a valuable form of creative criticism. In modern usage the word 'parody' no longer implies exact imitation, but a form of humorous yet controlled exaggeration.¹ In that quality of 'controlled exaggeration' lies the value of parody as criticism. The formal critic is able only to take a pointer to literature, hoping that as he speaks and shifts his indicating wand from place to place on the surface of the work criticized, the audience will detect the significance of his comments. The parodist makes no direct comment. Unlike the formal critic, he *creates*: he has ceased to be an analyst, a breaker-down, a separator of part from part; that was his chrysalis stage: he is now a synthesist, a builder-up, a combiner of part with part. He sets to work to make a new thing—similar to the already existing thing, but with differences. The texture is similar, but the peculiarities of patterning are slightly more pronounced. The parodist has a twofold function: (a) he must produce writings that are of immediate interest in themselves, even for a reader who knows nothing of the original that is being parodied—that is to say, he must be, in part, a creator; (b) he must be an unusually illuminating critic for those who go to him for that service. Every book of parodies should qualify for an unwritten sub-title, *Criticism without Tears*.

A Christmas Garland is made up of seventeen chapters, each with Christmas as its topic, and each written in the style of some contemporary author—A. C. Benson, Wells, Conrad, Bennett, Shaw, and a dozen others. The title of the

¹ Unless the exaggeration is controlled, judiciously and sensitively, the result is *burlesque*, not parody.

Benson chapter, 'Out of Harm's Way', is itself a clue to the prevailing mood in that author's writings. A. C. Benson, a pleasant essayist, lived as a college don in cloistered remoteness. His observations of life were made from the safe distance and quietude of a college window to which the noises of the world came muted from far away. Life, for him, had been coloured by autumnal mellowness, as beautiful as Max Beerbohm's captured breath of its spirit:

The yellowing leaves of the lime trees, the creeper that flushed to so deep a crimson against the old grey walls, the chrysanthemums that shed so prodigally their petals on the smooth green lawn—all these things, beautiful and wonderful though they were, were somehow a little melancholy also, as being signs of the year's decay.

Max Beerbohm's gentle though merciless hand unveils the safe obviousness of Benson's reflections; the genial and placid sermonizing tone; the genteel restraint of 'h—g' (for 'hang'), 'b-th-r ('bother')'; the pedantic qualification of statement, and the thoughtful provision of alternative phrases, as though the writer would not permit himself to use definite and settled words for which he might be called to account.

Very different, of course, is *Perkins and Mankind*, 'after' H. G. Wells. Here there is no placidity or autumnal greyness, but the notorious Wellsian determination to be up and doing, never to sit still and submit. The breathless lack of repose in Wells's style is pointedly indicated; in the Wells way, a little plebeian hero moves in country-house circles; there is the familiar note of a mechanized system of social reform; and here, too, is the curious sensation (so well known to H. G. Wells's readers) of mankind suddenly becoming no more than a smear of minute organisms on a bacteriologist's microscope slide. The Joseph Conrad parody (*The Feast*) shows those peculiarities of manner¹

¹ e.g., the inverted positions of adjectives and nouns, with the adjectives usually in twos or threes: 'the silence murmurous and unquiet'; 'tendrils venomous, frantic and faint.'

evident in the early novels, before Conrad accustomed himself to the intricacies of the English language. Max Beerbohm also contrives to display the irony for which Conrad's books are celebrated.

A Christmas Garland, and the several other volumes he published after 1900, made Max Beerbohm one of the few writers of the eighteen-nineties who carried their reputations undimmed into the twentieth century. Though Bernard Shaw, Wells, and others lived and wrote in the 'nineties they were not of that period. The typical eighteen-nineties people—Wilde and Dowson, Beardsley, Charles Conder, and others—were, in their better moments, brilliant and hard, gleaming and iridescent, like diamonds and rubies and sapphires and opals. Sometimes their works—books and pictures—were like painstakingly wrought cameos of exquisite design: and their writings might also be compared with creations in several arts other than literature. These men were like painters, jewellers, goldsmiths, and sculptors who had mislaid their proper century, lost their way, and fallen into the wrong country. As contemporaries and countrymen of Benvenuto Cellini, they would have felt more at ease. The larger liberties of the Italian Renaissance period would have enabled them to stab with the utmost grace; to poison quite beautifully; to carve tombs and to fashion goblets for the world to wonder at during centuries afterwards. But their destiny was to live in late nineteenth-century England; and thirty years after their heyday even their names were almost forgotten.

Max Beerbohm survived, however—a phenomenon, immaculate in dress and in mental vesture. While the other writers of the eighteen-nineties were becoming mythical figures, and the period itself like a vapour of opium, Max continued to flourish. In an age of hurry, he never hurried; in a machine age he preserved in his writings and drawings the delicate craftwork of a more leisured and less strenuous time; in an age when most people could write moderately well, but few had anything to write about,

he was perfect in both manner and matter. And when he was at length induced to broadcast on the radio he was immediately the perfect broadcaster, cajoling the microphone to communicate his delicate nuances. From the senility of youth he grew in vigour and sincerity and humanity, until, in middle life, heart was revealed as well as brain. The 1920 volume of essays, *And Even Now*, has the same perfection of style as the former volumes—each word in its place, not a word too many; but, additionally, it had an admixture of human feeling that set it apart from Beerbohm's youthful work. If *William and Mary* and *Something Defeasible*¹ are compared with *The Pervasion of Rouge*,² it becomes obvious that the author had travelled far, emotionally, in twenty-five years. He could not, in 1896, have drawn the word-picture of Mary, with her laugh that was like the chiming of silvery bells. Among many good things in *And Even Now*, nothing is better than No. 2. *The Pines*, a miniature masterpiece of biography in which Swinburne and Watts-Dunton come vividly to life again. In that sketch Beerbohm anticipated the methods of Lytton Strachey.

As the years passed, Max Beerbohm's prose grew less mannered and artificial than formerly (without losing anything of its economy, rhythm, and balance), while his books grew richer in content, gaining immeasurably by the maturity and sanity of his outlook. He holds a high place among twentieth-century essayists because, in his later books, he is completely original, whereas others carried on the tradition of the early nineteenth-century periodical essayists.

Max Beerbohm is not among the supremely great; nor is he a creative artist on the grand scale. He is, rather, a creative critic of literature and life, with a generous streak of special genius. He is a Little Master in all that he touched; a tonic in a jaded age; a philosophic jester bursting bubbles of snobbery and pretence with wit and

¹ Both in *And Even Now*.

² In *The Works of Max Beerbohm*.

irony and satire. He played little if any part in the social and political turmoil of his time; but if it could not be said of him that he was 'ever a fighter', it must be said that he was ever a watcher. Little escaped his notice. He could portray the mind of a contemporary in a phrase, and with a few strokes of the pencil fix both body and soul upon paper. Though not himself a vocally aggressive interrogator, he accurately diagnosed the spirit of the age when, shortly after the war of 1914-18 ended, he drew a cartoon entitled *The Future as the Twentieth Century sees it*. The picture is of a haggard young man looking disconsolately upon a looming mist; nothing can be seen beyond it, but, on the face of the mist—reflecting the dominant quality of the young man's mind—appears a large mark of interrogation.

§ 2. *The Mantle of Lamb*

No one who chanced to rub shoulders in the street with E. V. Lucas would have been astonished to hear him singing:

'Charles Lamb's body lies a-mouldering in the grave.
But his soul goes marching on.'

Regard for Charles Lamb was never so deep and widespread as in the first two decades of the twentieth century; and no other generation was so infected by his spirit. This was to a large extent due to E. V. Lucas's sustained enthusiasm for Elia.

In our day (as in Lamb's), journalism has nursed and housed literature, its elder brother. But for the popularization of familiar essays¹ in newspapers and journals, it would have been an unreasonably risky adventure to publish collections of such essays in book form. Nor has it been a matter merely of granting journalistic hospitality *en route*. More than one well-known essayist began at the instigation

¹ The term 'familiar essay' is used here to distinguish between this type and the formal or critical essay.

of a newspaper editor. This is worth notice, since it has produced at least two interesting effects. *First*, the introduction into the Press of writings definitely literary in character helped to raise the standard of journalistic prose all round, and the word 'journalese' lost its sting. *Second*, the essayists themselves, in 'writing to order' and to fill a limited space, were compelled to submit to a discipline that was serviceable, even though irksome. A writer who produces, all the year round and for years on end, a daily essay that seldom falters from a high level of prose style, is not a hack journalist but a genius. Only a little genius, perhaps; though the diminutive is unimportant, since the writings of little geniuses—like the pictures of little masters—are often extraordinarily pleasant to meet and return to.

Again, the periodical essayist who is limited to a thousand or fifteen hundred words has no space for 'frills' or verbiage or elaborated purple patches. That is to every one's advantage. Complaint is not made against a sonnet because it has only fourteen lines; and limitation is no more harsh or artificial when an essay has to be kept within a thousand words. What good work can be done frequently and regularly in narrow space was shown by 'The Londoner'¹ in *Day In and Day Out* (1924), a collection from essays contributed to the *Evening News* during a continuous period of about twenty years. 'The Londoner' was sound and sensible, bright and witty, and often wise also. He picked up his subjects anywhere. That (as might well be argued) is the only right way; for the familiar essayist's subject is anything, everything, nothing. In the end, he requires no subjects but only material, and his material is Life. Open 'The Londoner's' volume and the reader is faced on every page with some facet of Life; for example:

There is no saying to what we may come or how we shall earn to-morrow's bread in this world that pitches and tosses in a gale of change. Any day might see my business of selling words fail me; might see me, instead, selling bone collar studs and

¹ Oswald Barron (*d.* 1939).

indiarubber umbrella rings. I hope that I should take that change calmly. Much could be said in favour of the collar stud industry; he who follows it lives under the open sky and sees life.¹

Ten thousand people meeting those sentences in the evening paper feel at once a peculiar pleasant 'something' emanating from the words. They call it 'charm'—and they let it rest vaguely at that. And this something called 'charm' is the indispensable gift of the essayist. Without it, learning, wit, style are not enough. Robert Louis Stevenson's style (if it were possible to isolate it from his charm) would be to many an intolerable nuisance. He is a popular writer in spite of his style, not because of it; and his popularity is rooted in the same quality as that of Lamb, Lucas, 'The Londoner', Lynd, and others: namely, in his charm. What, then, is charm? The answer might be found in the quotation above, as well as on any other page of the essayists named. What is loosely described as a writer's charm consists in his sympathy and understanding and sense of fellowship. These are picked up and communicated by his style, as broadcast matter is picked up and communicated by an aerial. Style without charm is as silent for most people as an aerial in a world without receiving sets or transmitters.

E. V. Lucas's publications occupy over twenty columns in the British Museum catalogue, and recognizing that some embarrassment might be caused by his own fertility, he anthologized himself² as well as others. With *The Open Road* (1899), *The Gentlest Art*³ (1907), and other popular collections, E. V. Lucas drew attention to the fruitfulness of the field in which he was at that time almost a solitary gleaner—and always a discriminating one. Afterwards a swarm of anthologists settled locust-like upon English literature.

¹ *Being Good with Children.*

² *Variety Lane* (1916), *Harvest Home* (1913), etc.

³ An excellent anthology of letters.

Edward Verrall Lucas (1868-1938) was born at Eltham, and educated at London University. After working on provincial and London newspapers he became assistant-editor of *Punch*; and subsequently literary adviser and director to a publishing house. He edited a definitive edition of the works and letters of Charles and Mary Lamb (1903-5), and wrote the standard *Life of Charles Lamb* (1905). His remaining works comprised travel-books, essays, books about paintings and a number of volumes that hover between essay and novel: these last E. V. Lucas calls 'entertainments'.

He himself said: 'Lamb lives and will live by virtue of being himself and expressing this self in a series of prose essays unsurpassed in their charm, prodigality of fancy and literary artifice, marked by profound common sense, and starred with passages of great beauty, dazzling insight and kindly capricious humour.'¹ This passage is interesting in relation to the man who wrote it, as well as to Elia. Lucas could wear the mantle of Charles Lamb without presumptuousness, but there are pronounced dissimilarities between the two writers. E. V. Lucas's books have considerable charm, but while 'Gentle Elia' exactly fits the mood of Lamb's essays, has any reader been moved to close *One Day and Another* (for example) with a faint sigh and to murmur 'Gentle E. V.'? The robust urbanity and sophistication of Lucas made him unlike Lamb, who, though he knew 'more about what books are worth reading than any one living', wore all his knowledge with a deceptive air of innocence: he was 'all for quietness and not being seen, and having his own thoughts and his own jokes'.² Lucas's essays and 'entertainments' are marked by fancy, literary artifice, common sense, and humour, as well as charm.

¹ Introduction to *The Best of Lamb* (1914).

² The phrases quoted in this passage are from an imaginary conversation—'My Cousin the Bookbinder'—in *Character and Comedy* (1907) in which E. V. Lucas put descriptions of Elia and his circle into the mouth of the bookbinder cousin mentioned in Lamb's letters.

Yet his humour, though kindly in general, is sometimes almost savage, as in *Those Thirty Minutes*,¹ a satirical dialogue aimed at people who agonize their friends by 'secing them off' on railway journeys. The delight of E. V. Lucas's essays is that they entice into so many by-paths; they give the sense of browsing in a fully informed and liberal mind. That may be said of his 'entertainments' also. *Over Bemerton's* (1908), the best of these, is perennially charming—for its delicate sentiment, its quiet wisdom, its humane 'bookishness', and its store of curious knowledge.

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To guess at the identity of 'Alpha of the Plough' was for some time a pleasant literary parlour-game. When the official revelation was made it was not easy to recognize 'Alpha' in A. G. Gardiner, then best known as a political journalist and editor. Over the initials A. G. G. he had already made his mark in literature with a series of character sketches which were a feature in the *Saturday Daily News*, before they appeared in the two volumes, *Prophets, Priests, and Kings* (1908) and *Pillars of Society* (1913). These biographical and critical essays are remarkable for direct and forceful English, insight, conscientious fairness and sense of proportion, and sound judgment of character. They were written for a paper representing a political party, and often amid the turmoil of controversy; yet, after a lapse of many years, comparatively few revisions of judgment appeared necessary.

When essays by 'Alpha of the Plough' began to appear in *The Star*, that London evening newspaper became as interesting to bookmen as to bookmakers. The earlier pieces (collected in *Pebbles on the Shore*, 1917) reflect something of that pathetic belief in the coming of a new world, which upheld English people in 1915 and 1916, only to fail them when the war ended. Mostly, however, 'Alpha'

¹ *Mixed Vintages* (1919).

approached Life in the playful spirit that is frequently more perceptive than is ponderous meditation. From his pages there occasionally blows a faint wind of mortality—a sobering breath, no more—as when he writes:

We are all glad to have come this way once. It is the thought of a second journey that chills us and gives us pause. . . . If you came back with that weak chin and flickering eye, not all the experience of all the ages would save you from futility.

As 'Y. Y.' of the *New Statesman*, Robert Lynd looked at the world week by week for many years, setting down his reflections, now gravely, now with gaiety and gusto. Being more directly and coolly critical in his approach, he had neither the confident urbanity of E. V. Lucas, nor the sensitive comprehensiveness of A. G. Gardiner. But he was a skilled phrasemaker¹ and could describe a Cup Final with his eye on many things besides the game—or on everything except the game;² and few things more deliciously funny have been written than *Eggs: An Easter Homily*.³

§ 3. *Literature—and Life*

Although journalism fostered the familiar essay, its influence upon literary criticism in the twentieth century was not equally helpful. The 'new journalism' at the end of the Victorian period had one principal aim—to get rid of stolidity. It succeeded. At the same time (intentionally or not) it abolished solidity, until at length, in the popular Press, the tendency was to attempt to make headlines not only the essence of journalism, but its substance also. The literary quarterlies resisted the spirit of the age, but their former influence had declined, and their attention was

¹ e.g., 'There is grave danger of a revival of virtue in this country. There are, I know, two kinds of virtue, and only one of them is a vice.'—*Virtue* (*The Pleasures of Ignorance*, 1921).

² *The Battle of Waterloo* (*The Blue Lion*, 1923).

³ *The Pleasures of Ignorance*.

increasingly engaged by politics. Certain weeklies and monthlies¹ strove to uphold the cause of letters, yet even these did not find it easy to provide substantial criticism while dealing with an ever-swelling tide of new books. After 1919, moreover, a number of the important weekly, monthly, and quarterly journals ceased publication.

The multiplicity of books was in some degree accountable for the gentle tone of early twentieth-century criticism, compared with that of the nineteenth century. 'Review the popular. Review some of the good. Ignore the bad' became more and more a general standing order. 'The tradition of Jeffrey and Gifford and Macaulay was left behind. When (infrequently) criticism was caustic, it was usually very brief, and critics sometimes cared more for turning an epigram than for righteous judgment. Macaulay destroyed Montgomery by patient and leisured disintegration; Rebecca West, in such circumstances, would have chosen the method of instant detonation, as she did on a memorable occasion when, set to review a popular novelist's new book, she wrote only: 'Mr. — has produced another novel. How long, O Lord, how long.'²

This was also, in general, the method practised (though less briefly) by G. K. Chesterton, who was nevertheless a fine critic, until the trick of parody became a pernicious habit, and led him to parody his own early manner more extravagantly than Max Beerbohm had in *A Christmas Garland*.³ The deterioration in his style can be seen by comparing Chesterton's books on Browning (1903)⁴ and Dickens (1906) with his *Francis of Assisi* (1923). The *Browning* is brilliant, but also clear and helpful. It is probably the best introductory guide for readers troubled

¹ *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Observer*, *New Statesman*, *London Mercury* (which ended its career in 1939; it was founded by (Sir) J. C. Squire in 1919, and was for some years the leading English literary periodical), and a few others.

² *New Statesman*: July 8, 1922.

³ *Some Damnable Errors about Christmas*.

⁴ *English Men of Letters* series.

by that poet's 'difficulty'. The book on Dickens combines enthusiasm with sanity, and ranks second only to George Gissing's critical study, *Charles Dickens* (1898). *Francis of Assisi*, however, is often a confusion of epigram and paradox, with Chesterton gyrating among words as amusingly (and as unprofitably) as a puppy chasing its own tail. A phrase or two from *Twelve Types* (1910) will show how, before verbal trickery became an obsession with him, Chesterton could put as much into one sentence as another could into a chapter:

In the pacifist mythology of Tolstoy and his followers St. George did not conquer the dragon: he tied a pink ribbon round its neck and gave it a saucer of milk.¹

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Charlotte Brontë showed that abysses may exist inside a governess and eternities inside a manufacturer; her heroine is the commonplace spinster, with the dress of merino and the soul of flame.²

A sound argument against criticism by epigram is that it can be quoted with unintelligent facility by people too indolent to form their own judgments. Chesterton's description of Thomas Hardy as 'the village atheist brooding and blaspheming over the village idiot'³ is far from the whole truth about Hardy; it contains a germ of truth, and it also has behind it more thoughtful consideration than is usually understood by those who hurry to quote the epigram.

Some of the best literary criticism of the period was done by writers whose temperaments were at variance with the hurried spirit of the age; and especially by those whose vision was not narrowed down to the petty heresy that criticism is a private affray between reviewers and authors. Literary criticism is valueless save when it also provides

¹ *Tolstoy and the Cult of Simplicity.*

² *Charlotte Brontë.*

³ *The Victorian Age in Literature* (1913).

a commentary upon life: the critic's qualifications and standards are proportionate to his own inner experience. His function (aside from the examination of technical and textual questions) is to judge of the quality and degree of Truth (imaginatively considered) in the author's work. Alice Meynell (1850-1922)—herself an austere critic and an austere perfect creator in poetry and prose—demanded much of any critic who should presume to judge Coventry Patmore's odes. What she required in that one relation is what might reasonably be looked for, always, in every critic: 'precision, and its rare companions—liberty, flight, height, courage, a sense of space and a sense of closeness, readiness for spiritual experience, and all the gravity, all the resolution, of the lonely reader'.¹ What she demanded of others she herself possessed. A lonely reader and profoundly meditative, she was at the same time acquainted with life in its depth and breadth and height. When she pronounced upon a book, life was her standard and measure—as when she says:

It is no wonder that the proffer of Browning's optimism, half-heartedly made again on the day of his centenary, did again fail. His 'All's well with the world' is as vain as the pessimist's 'All's wrong with it'. It is out of the range of customary life. Intelligible joy and grief are in the midways, and in the midways there is cause for as much sadness as our human hearts can hold.²

Alice Meynell's judgments may not always command assent (she is even a little perverse about Jane Austen³), but her sympathies were much wider than might have been expected of any one so little touched as she was by what some regard as grosser delights. In one essay she discusses Job, Genesis, Dante, Boccaccio, Claudel, . . . and concludes thus:

¹ *Coventry Patmore (The Second Person Singular, and other Essays, 1922).*

² *Pessimism in Fiction (The Second Person Singular).*

³ *The Classic Novelist (ibid.).*

Monsieur Paul Claudel's *L'Otage* should be ministered to pessimists, or rather to their readers, for tears, and Mr. Jacobs for laughter. The age is not without its remedies.¹

Neither before nor since, probably, has W. W. Jacobs been named in such august company. Yet the root of truth (as Alice Meynell well knew) is in that conjunction of names. Poor is the man (and the critic, too) whose spirit is so illiberal as to restrain him from being on good terms simultaneously with Job and Jacobs, Boccaccio and Francis of Assisi, Milton and Edgar Wallace, Donne and P. G. Wodehouse, though this was a liberal doctrine that received little support in the nineteen-thirties, when criticism became austere to the point of barrenness among the intellectuals and straitlaced to the stage of spinsterishness among the half-intellectuals.

The collected *Essays of Alice Meynell* (1914) is a harvest of wisdom and loveliness. Whether she writes of Andromeda and Arcturus, of laughter or colour, children or sleep, her touch is perfect and her vision clear. She sees a ragged London boy in Hyde Park on the margin of the Serpentine:

Clothed now with the sun, he is crowned by-and-by with twelve stars as he goes to bathe, and the reflection of an early moon is under his feet. . . .

It is easy to replace man, and it will take no great time, when Nature has lapsed, to replace Nature. It is always to do, by the happy easy way of doing nothing. The grass is always ready to grow in the streets—and no streets could ask for a more charming finish than your green grass. . . . As the bathing child shuffles off his garments—they are few, and one brace suffices him—so the land might always, in reasonable time, shuffle off its yellow brick and purple slate, and all the things that collect about railway stations.²

Alice Meynell's poetry was said to consist less of sounds than of silences. That is equally true of her prose. She

¹ *Pessimism in Fiction.*

² *The Colour of Life* (in the *Essays*).

was at once impassioned and austere; her emotions were severely disciplined, to the end that reticence might prevail in her writings.

A natural, though perhaps not obvious, association of ideas leads from Alice Meynell to Maurice Hewlett (1861–1923). Hewlett tried for twenty years or more to throw off the restrictions of the popular success that came to him with *The Forest Lovers* in 1898. That novel is among the best of its kind—and the kind need not be despised. But Hewlett disliked being labelled as a romantic medievalist. His interest, for a large part of his life, lay in other directions—in poetry, philosophy, and the study of agricultural conditions. In addition to several historical novels¹ he wrote a trilogy² about a gipsy-scholar, John Maxwell Senhouse, whose letters to Sanchia Percival³ express what may be accepted (at least in part) as Hewlett's own philosophy, based upon the maxim: 'Now abide . . . Poverty, Temperance, Simplicity—these three. But the greatest of these is Poverty.' Hewlett, without being tied to any religious denomination, was, by temperament, part Franciscan, part Quaker. For the last few years of his life he lived among Wiltshire villagers, and testified: 'I who was once rich and now am poor, seriously declare that I had not the gleam of a notion what contentment was until I became as I am.'⁴ His long poem, 'The Song of the Plow' (1916) is a chronicle of the travail of the agricultural labourer through the centuries; and the cause of the English peasantry filled Maurice Hewlett's thoughts and guided his actions from the war-period onward. During those years he wrote⁵ his best work—a long sequence of essays gathered into four volumes.⁵ The English spirit—its placidity and depth, its sound common sense, its poetry

¹ *The Life and Death of Richard Yen-and-Nay* (1900); *The Queen's Quair* (1904), etc.

² *Halfway House* (1908), *Open Country* (1909), *Rest Harrow* (1910).

³ These were published separately in 1910.

⁴ *Our First, and Last* (*Wiltshire Essays*, 1921).

⁵ For titles, see Index.

and idealism—has seldom been better expressed. His style, perfectly adjusted to the subject-matter, is clear and luminous, sensitive and serene. The likeness between Hewlett and Alice Meynell came from their quietness of spirit. Hewlett began an essay on Dorothy Wordsworth¹ thus: 'I have often wished that I could write a novel in which, as mostly in life, nothing happens'; and he valued Dorothy's *Journal* because 'the peace of it is profound. . . . This woman was not so much poet as crystal vase. You can see the thought cloud and take shape.' It followed as a natural consequence of Hewlett's love of quietness that even the pages in which he was most proudly English are free from insular arrogance. Imperial greatness made little appeal to him. Amid the doubts and difficulties of the years after the war, Hewlett thought it probable that a time would arrive when 'we shall become . . . once more "a small, hardy, fishing, and pastoral people"'. He looked forward without apprehension to that prospect, saying, 'If a little England was good enough for Queen Elizabeth and Sir Walter Raleigh it is good enough for me.'²

Percy Lubbock's *Earlham* (1922) enshrined the English spirit of a passing age. The atmosphere and life of a country household in Victorian times are re-created by the author, who, as a child, stayed at Earlham Hall, the Norfolk seat of the Gurneys, an old Quaker family. Percy Lubbock visited the house again in later life, and as he passed through the rooms and the garden and wandered about the countryside, he endeavoured to re-live the memories so vividly stirred. To read *Earlham* is like passing a long sunny day shielded from hot sunshine in a cool leafy place. The old virtues—modesty, humility, piety, charity, and those others that some in the twentieth century regard as dull and stuffy—are here seen in the guileless beauty of true holiness. Famous figures—Elizabeth Fry, George Borrow—pass across the scene; but in the future

¹ *The Crystal Vase (In a Green Shade)*.

² *Our First, and Last*.

these may seem insignificant in comparison with 'our grandmother':

She loved the green window-seat and the rustling shadow of the limes. As she grew old and older, she used to sit there in the window for long hours, alone in the summer evening, till the light faded away. She sat without book or work, drinking in the twilit fragrance, communing in her mind—with what?—with the thought of many beloved dead, whom she had lost and mourned, and with the joy of reunion with them that she saw near at hand now, in a very few years. Her mind was *there*, more and more. As the evening darkened she seemed, sitting in the window, to have all but passed already into the light she awaited; it shone in her face, I remember, as she spoke of it. I remember vividly her look as she once exclaimed, in sudden uncontrollable wonder, '*What* will it be?—what will it be like?'

Percy Lubbock, in *The Craft of Fiction* (1921) endeavoured to make a critical study of the novel, considered objectively and 'in the round'. He refers to the difficulty of 'seeing' a novel as a unity—in the way that a statue, a picture, or a lyric can be seen. The largeness of novels causes them to enter the reader's mind piecemeal, in a sequence of inconstant pictures. Percy Lubbock took a few representative novels and treated them critically, in such a way as to make it possible for a reader to hold them more definitely in the mind as complete and rounded works of art.

The Craft of Fiction and Lascelles Abercrombie's *The Idea of Great Poetry* (1925) stand out among critical works of their day. Whereas Lubbock's book is principally concerned with problems of form, the field of inquiry is wider in *The Idea of Great Poetry*. Most immediately helpful to the reader and student of poetry is the first chapter on Diction and Experience, in which Abercrombie develops the thesis that the function of poetry is the translation into language (and the communication) of unusually intense and vivid experience.

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's published lectures on

literature, though graceful and attractive, are less substantial and illuminating than Abercrombie's. As King Edward VII Professor of English Literature at Cambridge (1912 onwards), Q¹ influenced many young writers. Before his university duties began, he had written short stories, novels, and some criticism; and a new generation welcomed his *On the Art of Writing* (1916) and *On the Art of Reading* (1920), harvested from the Cambridge lectures. Q's colloquial ease and geniality (and a gift for much quoting) are attractive, even if his substance is sometimes thin. Three achievements must be credited to Q: a revival of interest in the English (1611) Bible; a partially successful campaign against jargon, and in support of simplicity in prose style; and *The Oxford Book of English Verse* (1900; enlarged in 1939)—which became (as much as Westminster Abbey) a national institution.

The notion of literary criticism as a record of 'the adventures of the soul among masterpieces', and of reading as mainly a matter of enjoyment, was a suitable accompaniment to the romantic mood in literature and life. When romanticism went out of fashion in the nineteen-twenties, criticism turned away from the pleasure principle and resumed an austere scholarly habit, as in the case of T. S. Eliot and his disciples, or took a scientific track, as in the case of I. A. Richards and the young men who studied under him. In the nineteen-thirties the increase of political tension at home and abroad turned literary criticism towards a line of inquiry based upon ideological tests and partaking of the nature of a heresy hunt. Though Eliot's criticism may seem, to the average mind, frigid and monochromatic, it has its roots in a genuine traditional culture. He called the attention of his contemporaries to the existence of standards—intellectual and spiritual—in *The Criterion* (a periodical which ran from 1922 to 1939), in *The Sacred Wood* (1920), *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928), *Elizabethan Essays* (1934), *The Use of Poetry and the Use of*

¹ Quiller-Couch's pseudonym.

Criticism (1933), and other critical writings. I. A. Richards was so hot for mental certainties in *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1925) and *Practical Criticism* (1929) that Pegasus was in momentary peril of being turned into a dray-horse pulling a psychological load. Pure enjoyment became suspect in academic circles and among the coteries. Aesthetic pleasure and emotional satisfaction were lumped together as 'escapism', and to be an escapist was to be among the damned.

CHAPTER VI

TRAVELLERS AND BIOGRAPHERS

§ 1. *W. H. Hudson; R. B. Cunninghame Graham*

OF MILLIONS who have wandered up and down the world and of thousands with travel stories worth telling, only the tens have had the ability to write of their wanderings in enduring form. A man who determines to find wonders everywhere, persuading himself that every village mill-race is a Niagara and every molehill an Everest, is not a man likely to write fine travellers' tales. The material for travel books is perhaps the richest available for any form of literature, but it is stubborn to handle. It is not the wonders of the world that have provided travellers with their most memorable material; it is, rather, such simple episodes as might happen equally well in an English country lane, on the Arabian desert, or in the forests of the Andes. Ultimately, it is probably true that a first-rate travel book depends comparatively little upon strangeness or remoteness of locality, and much upon the character and vision of the traveller. An ingenious controversialist could no doubt uphold the proposition that the finest of travel books may yet be written by a man who has never stirred beyond his own backyard. A few sentences about fleas (as in Kinglake's *Eöthen*), or a paragraph about a drunken schoolmaster on the South American pampas (as in W. H. Hudson's *Far Away and Long Ago*), may help to make a book more worth while than any pretentious volume on the wonders of the world.

Both W. H. Hudson and R. B. Cunninghame Graham travelled in remote parts of the world, and became richly stoted with wanderer's lore. Yet Hudson wrote some of his most entrancing books about life in the English counties, and Cunninghame Graham about his native Scotland. Many autobiographical glimpses were given by Hudson,

but in *Far Away and Long Ago* (1918) he provided a detailed picture of his early years. He does not mention dates, however, and his biographer, Morley Roberts, found it difficult to fix the few that are relevant. Hudson's birthplace was the farm of the Twenty-five Ombú Trees on the grasslands of Argentina, about ten miles from Buenos Aires. Though his grandfather was an Englishman, born in Exeter, his father and mother were both from the United States. They migrated to the Argentine before the birth of their children, of whom William Henry Hudson was the third—born in 1841. He came to England a year or two before he was thirty; was naturalized in this country thirty years later (1900); and died in London, 1922. Though not English either by parentage or birthplace, Hudson was a faithful and devoted lover of England, its soil and people, and he liked to be regarded as a native.

The picture of his childhood on the pampas, in *Far Away and Long Ago*, is more than a plain autobiographical record. It abounds in remembered beauties and wise reflections on life. He was an old man when he wrote this book, and the play of memory upon the remote years produced 'a wonderfully clear and continuous vision of the past'. Hudson was a man of wide and deep experience, as well as a reader and thinker; he was a 'full man', with a natural sense of what should be said and what left unsaid. Though he cannot perhaps be described as a natural stylist, his work has a clear naturalness—so much so, that the same hasty conclusion is sometimes made about Hudson as about even better prose writers than he: namely, that he had *no* style. That is a point not worth debating, when it is considered that, at his best, Hudson could make a page of prose as satisfying and refreshing as a stretch of downland lying still and calm in the pale golden light of a late autumn evening.¹

The quiet serenity of Hudson's prose is in natural accord

¹ See, for example, Hudson's description of the Vale of the Wylze: *A Shepherd's Life*, ch. XIII.

with the spirit of the man. Life to him was a source of quiet joy, and his delight in mere living is worth noting, since many of his contemporaries in English literature were men aggrieved—if not in respect of themselves, then in respect of others who suffer. Hudson's delight in life was not an occasional impulse, but a conviction declared in his works from first to last. In *The Purple Land* (1885), Richard Lamb (a fictitious character) is made to say on the first page, 'What soul in this wonderful various world would wish to depart before ninety! The dark as well as the light, its sweet and its bitter, make me love it.' On the last page of *Far Away and Long Ago*, published thirty-three years after, Hudson speaks of an earlier time when he passed through a period of spiritual questioning, following a serious illness. The physicians had prophesied gloomily in regard to his probable length of life, but they proved to be false prophets. Hudson goes on to say:

Barring accidents, I could count on thirty, forty, even fifty years with their summers and autumns and winters. And that was the life I desired—the life the heart can conceive—the earth life. When I hear people say they have not found the world and life so agreeable and interesting as to be in love with it, or that they look with equanimity to its end, I am apt to think they have never been properly alive nor seen with clear vision the world they think so meanly of, or anything in it—not a blade of grass. . . . In my worst times, when I was compelled to exist shut out from Nature in London for long periods, sick and poor and friendless, I could yet always feel that it was infinitely better to be than not to be.

He was no arm-chair philosopher: he had known much of the sweets of life, but also its bitterness, and pain, poverty, and loneliness. The solace and assurance that he found in the simple fact of being alive were derived from his intimate communion with Nature. He was not a recluse, however. When considering the loveliness of a landscape, he thought much of the people among its hills and valleys, and suggested, as one of its principal charms, 'the sense

of beautiful human things hidden from sight among the masses of foliage'.¹

From early boyhood Hudson was a patient and solitary watcher of Nature. Out in the Argentine, while a child, he would often be missed from home, and these unexplained absences worried his mother: 'She would secretly follow and watch me standing motionless among the tall reeds or under the trees by the half-hour, staring at vacancy.' Happily, his mother—a woman of wisdom and understanding—left him undisturbed to continue his watching. A friend whom he used to visit in London towards the end of his life, has told how Hudson would be found standing motionless, with bent back, staring out through the window. Thus he would remain perfectly still for long periods—watching the birds amid the trees in the courtyard.

Those who care at all for Hudson's books like them intensely, but his audience had never been large. After he died, his name became familiar to thousands for the first time when the bird-sanctuary was set up in Hyde Park as a memorial to him. Interest was artificially stimulated by a newspaper controversy around Jacob Epstein's sculptured representation of Rima, a semi-human character in Hudson's South American romance, *Green Mansions* (1904). The publicity thus given to Rima persuaded many people that *Green Mansions* is Hudson's most notable book—an untenable judgment. Imaginative romance was not his natural field. He was happier in a form which permitted direct transmission of his extraordinarily acute faculty of observation, and in the discursively personal books he is most truly himself, the W. H. Hudson who is different from all other writers.

A Shepherd's Life (1910) is the best of Hudson's nature books, though that term is too narrow for writings so full and various as these. He was unlike both Maeterlinck and Fabre: Maeterlinck's bees, he thought, were falsely humanized; Fabre he admired, but he could not himself have

¹ *A Shepherd's Life*, ch. XIII.

been content to watch Nature under the microscope. He differed, too, from Richard Jefferies. Jefferies was a more sentimentally lyrical writer; and Hudson had no patience with the type of naturalist represented by Jefferies. The snaring and killing of rare birds was an abominable offence in Hudson's eyes, even though it might be committed in the name of science and for the sake of securing museum specimens. His museum was the open air, and he protested that rare specimens should be allowed to live unmolested. *A Shepherd's Life* is an entrancingly discursive narrative, a series of episodes and digressions grouped loosely around a central figure, Caleb Bawcombe, an old Wiltshire shepherd from whom Hudson heard most of the stories in the book. Plants, animals, men and women, are the stuff from which *A Shepherd's Life* is made, and everything comes vividly to life in Hudson's prose. He perceives activity and intelligence everywhere: in the grasses and herbs on Salisbury Plain, and in foxes and rabbits, as well as in Joe the coalman and the old church-cleaner, and a host of others. Among many fine things are the passages dealing with sheep-dogs and their ways. This is a book to stand alongside *The Compleat Angler* and *Selborne*.

Fully one-third of Hudson's writings is devoted to bird-studies: the birds of Argentina, the birds of England, the birds of London. His ability as an observer, and the amazing sharpness of his perceptions, can be gathered from the statement that he was able to recognize, by their songs alone, over one hundred and fifty different varieties of South American birds. He collaborated in a book on *Argentine Ornithology* (1889), the standard work on that subject; and in his last years wrote a number of excellent pamphlets for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

Of later writers on English farming and other country matters, A. G. Street and Adrian Bell are outstanding.

Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham (1852-1936) was a more romantic figure than W. H. Hudson. He was born

in Scotland, the eldest son of a Scottish laird who married the sister of Baron Elphinstone. Cunninghame Graham was educated at Harrow, and subsequently became a Member of Parliament, a Deputy Lieutenant, and a Justice of the Peace for three counties. Yet he was also, at one time, a prominent anarchist, and a leader in the great Dock Strike in London in 1887, when on 'Bloody Sunday' he fought the police in Trafalgar Square and went to prison. He also peered into many of the world's remote holes and corners, and his books record out-of-the-way experiences in out-of-the-way places. Like Hudson, he spent some time in South America. One of the best things written about him is the sketch by Bernard Shaw appended to the latter's play, *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*. Referring to Graham's *Mogreb-el-Aksa* (Morocco the Most Holy) (1898), Shaw says he was 'intelligent enough' to steal from that book the local colour he wanted for his play: 'its scenery, its surroundings, its atmosphere, its geography, its knowledge of the East, its fascinating Cadis and Kroo-boys and Sheikhs and mud castles.' There follows a vivid and amusing description of Cunninghame Graham's character and personality.

In his books the several Cunninghame Grahams come to light: the Scottish laird and the Spanish *hidalgo*, the irreverent legislator and the anarchic socialist. This bandit of letters had a word and a blow for every man. He was equally sceptical about aristocrats and anarchists, and could knock the wind out of a popular hero with a single sentence: 'Gladstone . . . though in talk for fifty years, never contrived to say a single thing either original or worth remembering.'¹ Travel sketches and travel stories are interspersed with episodes of Scottish life and character, and the moods of his writings are as varied as the scenes and adventures. There are horror and splendour, beauty and squalor; love and hate, passion and pain; cruelty, pity, cynicism, fear, courage, and irony. His pages are vigorous

¹ *A Memory of Parnell (His People, 1906).*

as life itself. While Hudson is placid and meditative, with passages sweet as bird-song, Cunninghame Graham is turbulent and acrid and explosive, restless as the broken waters of a mountain stream falling over jagged rocks. Nevertheless, when occasion demanded, he could stand away from the picture, efface himself, and reveal the pageant of the East. In *Mogreb-el-Aksa* the curtain is often thus drawn aside; while a shorter piece, *From the Mouth of the Sahara*,¹ is an admirable example of his descriptive method. In that essay he gives an impression of the passing hours during a day in the desert, and ends with a description of a veiled holy man riding at evening into Marrakesh: 'The night descended on the town, and the last gleams of sunlight flickering on the walls turned paler, changed to violet and grey, and the pearl-coloured mist creeping up from the palm woods outside the walls enshrouded everything.'

§ 2. *Hilaire Belloc and Others*

G. K. Chesterton once wrote that his only claim to remembrance in the future would be that he had taken part in a public debate with Hilaire Belloc. These two writers ran in harness together on many occasions, and it was a stock joke of the period to refer to them as a hybrid creature, 'the Chesterbelloc'. They collaborated as illustrator and author in a few satirical novels,² G. K. C. providing the pictures; but their general community of convictions and interests was more important in their works than any formal collaboration could be. Belloc's influence must be accounted the stronger, since Chesterton moved more and more closely towards the religious medievalism that Belloc propounded from the first. They both re-wrote English history, starting with the thesis that the Protestant Reformation was England's worst blunder, destroying the

¹ In *Success* (1902).

² *Emmanuel Burden* (1904), *Mr. Petre* (1925), etc.

golden Ages of Faith.¹ The history in these volumes is, however, weighed down with too much demonstration, and is no more convincing than other histories with a Protestant bias which Belloc and Chesterton aimed to supersede. Belloc's interest in current affairs and energy in controversy often diverted him from literature to argumentation, and much of his writing is ephemeral. Two controversies in which he almost unceasingly engaged centred around his advocacy of Roman Catholicism and his antagonism to Jews.

In his creative and imaginative books Belloc is so versatile that he might be put in any category, except that of the dramatists. He is novelist, poet, travel-writer, essayist, critic, historian, biographer, and children's writer. Despite G. K. Chesterton's enthusiasm it is doubtful whether Belloc's works will survive for long. If any do so, *The Path to Rome* (1902) will most likely ensure him a place among travel-writers; while *Danton* (1899) illustrates the vitality and living interest of Belloc's methods in biography and history.

Joseph Hilaire Pierre Belloc was born near Paris in 1870, the son of a French barrister and an Englishwoman who was descended from Priestley, the eighteenth-century chemist and Nonconformist republican. After attending the Oratory School at Edgbaston, Birmingham, Belloc returned to France to serve in the army, and developed that expert interest in military operations which is displayed in much of his written work. He returned to England in 1892, and took his degree at Oxford in 1895, with first-class honours in history. Then he served, by turns, as literary adviser on the *Morning Post*, Member of Parliament (1906-10), and Professor of English Literature at East London College (1911-13).

The Path to Rome describes the author's journey on foot from Toul, down the valley of the Moselle, across Switzerland,

¹ See Chesterton's *A Short History of England* (1917); and Belloc's *History of England* (1925 onwards).

over the Alps and down through Northern Italy to the City on the Tiber. It tells of hills and valleys, rivers, trees, and churches; of peasants and priests; wine, bridges, and Mass; of poets and songs and beer; of nuns, and wine again. Had it been written by a man of quieter spirit it would have been perfect. As it is, the book is like the conversation of a garrulous and unusually genial highwayman who occasionally pulls up short with a 'Stand and deliver!' The least pleasant feature of Belloc's prose style is his habit of writing at the top of his voice. In an essay on *Getting Respected at Inns and Hotels*¹ he advises:

As you come into the place go straight for the smoking-room, and begin talking of the local sport: and do not talk humbly and tentatively as so many do, but in a loud authoritative tone. You shall insist and lay down the law and fly in a passion if you are contradicted.

Hilaire Belloc followed his own advice elsewhere than in hotels and inns, though there is little to be gained by using 'a loud authoritative tone' in literature. There are many delights, however, in *The Path to Rome*. It is a rambling, gossipy book, written in unornamented but pictorial prose; without much set or formal descriptive comment, yet clearly suggesting the widely differing appearance and character of places and people. There is phantasy, also, of a satirical kind, as in the imaginary conversation between St. Michael and the Padre Eterno as they look down from heaven upon this world, 'one far point of light' shining in the void among some seventeen million others.² The affairs of the Earth and its people have slipped from the memory of the Padre Eterno. When St. Michael reminds Him of the making of Earth and

¹ *On Nothing and Kindred Subjects* (1908).

² It is curious that the idea here treated by Belloc in a vein of high comedy appeared independently, the same year (1902), in Hardy's *God-Forgotten* (*Poems of the Past and the Present*). The fundamental difference in treatment provides an interesting comment upon the two writers.

Man, the Eternal Father asks why the men are throwing themselves into strange attitudes:

'Sire!' cried St. Michael, in a voice that shook the architraves of heaven, 'they are worshipping You!' 'Oh! they are worshipping me! Well, that is the most sensible thing I have heard of them yet, and I altogether commend them. *Continuez*,' said the Padre Eterno, '*continuez*!'

As a historian, Belloc dissented from the academic methods current at the end of the nineteenth century. Though he draws upon historical documents and formal studies, these are, for his purpose, only the roughest of raw material. He takes the attitude and point of view of a 'traveller in time', working upon documentary evidence and shaping it by the deliberate exercise of creative imagination. Belloc considers that the historian's first duty is to identify himself directly and intimately with the period upon which he is working. It is not enough, in his opinion, for a twentieth-century historian to interpret a past age in terms of modernism: the historian should not only *look* back, he should *go* back and make the past age his own age for the time being, putting himself, imaginatively, in the position of an eye-witness of the events narrated. A plea for this method was made by Belloc in *Esto Perpetua* (1906):

Historians have fallen into a barren contemplation of the Roman decline, and their readers with difficulty escape that attitude. Save in some few novels, no writer has attempted to stand in the shoes of the time and to see it as must have seen it the barber of Marcus Aurelius or the stud groom of Sidonius' Palace. •

Belloc then proceeded to write *The Eye-Witness* (1908), 'a series of descriptions and sketches in which it is attempted to reproduce certain incidents and periods in history, as from the testimony of a person present at each'. This method is brilliant and attractive. It is also dangerous, except when used by a writer able to decide with conscientious precision what liberty may be allowed in the

imaginative 'restoration' of historical material. Belloc himself, for example, instead of reproducing or summarizing the extant rough notes of speeches made at Danton's trial, expands those notes and puts reconstructed speeches into the mouths of the persons concerned. What is possibly an exact representation and impression of scenes and actions is thus conveyed far better than by formal documentation. Acknowledgment of the advantage gained does not, however, fully meet the objection that the vivid picture may also be a distorted picture. At what stage, in the use of this method, does 'serious' history end and historical fiction begin?

Of the literary effectiveness of Belloc's method there can be no doubt; he has written nothing better than the frequently dramatic and moving passages in the histories and biographies. It is fascinating to watch the literary artist painting in details on a canvas where the main outlines are already drawn. Thomas Paine's 'ignorance of French was such that his speech on Louis's exile was translated for him': taking this piece of documentary evidence, Belloc turns it indirectly to account when describing Paine's meeting in prison with Danton: 'The author of "The Rights of Man" stepped up to him, *doubtless to address him in bad French.*'¹ Again:

In the morning of the 12th Germinal the Convention met, and *each man looked at his neighbour, and then, as though afraid, let his eyes wander to see if others thought as he did.*²

De Montfort . . . sat erect and firm'. . . ; *only an occasional shifting of his foot in the stirrup* betrayed the weakness of his broken leg.³

Phrases similar in effect to those here italicized occur many times, and by such additions to the bare narrative Belloc succeeds in bringing history out of schoolroom, library, and

¹ Danton: ch. VII.

² *Ibid.*

³ *The Armies Before Lewes (The Eye-Witness).*

study, into spacious places where its pageantry and movement can be realized: 'The day had remained serene and beautiful to the last, the sky was stainless, and the west shone like a forge. Against it, one by one, appeared the figures of the condemned. . . . One by one they came up the few steps, stood for a moment in the fierce light, black or framed in scarlet, and went down.'¹

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A very long list could be made of the younger contemporary travel-writers, but few of their books are likely to survive by literary merit. Arctic and Antarctic exploration—particularly the voyages of Scott and Shackleton—have an extensive modern literature. F. D. Ommanney's *South Latitude* (1938) is a well-written account of arduous adventure and endurance, and the same writer's *North Cape* (1939) is only little less good. Peter Fleming's *Brazilian Adventure* (1933) set a fashion of self-conscious and excessive understatement, which can as easily become a literary vice as exaggerated self-praise.

Though it has been noticed in the following section among autobiographies, T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* might also be included among travel-books alongside its great precursor, *Arabia Deserta* (1888), by Charles Doughty. Other distinguished writers on travel in the Middle East include Gertrude Bell and Freya Stark.²

§ 3. *Biography and Autobiography*

It has been seen in the preceding section that, by the beginning of the century, writers were questioning the literary manner hitherto accepted as adequate for biography. Hilaire Belloc's main concern, however, was with biography as an aspect of history. A few other writers apparently felt, vaguely, that something was wrong with

¹ *The Death of Danton* (*Danton*: ch. VII).

² See Index for titles of their principal books.

the general literary principle of English biography, and in such a book as A. G. Gardiner's *Prophets, Priests, and Kings* the foreshadowing of a new manner might be detected. During the nineteenth century a dreary utilitarianism settled upon biography. When a 'Life' was not merely a pious memorial tribute it was usually a repository of facts—a work designed for information, not for delight.

In 1900, those English biographies that were also pieces of literature could have been counted on the fingers of one hand; sporadic efforts towards change had produced little evident result up to 1918. In that year *Eminent Victorians*, by Lytton Strachey (1880–1932), was published. Six reprints were called for in seven months, and it became the talk of Britain and America. So far as English literature is concerned, Lytton Strachey's book was that rare phenomenon, 'something new'. Within a few weeks other authors were persuaded that, for the future, this was the best possible way to write biography, and during the next seven years no other book had so many imitators. The chorus of praise was far from unanimous, however. *Eminent Victorians* was more than an essay in literary method. It was also a lively and impudent challenge to Victorian self-content. Victorians had preferred to 'edit' their great men and women. They did not say: 'God made them; therefore let them pass'; nor did they much care to acknowledge that the elements are puzzlingly mixed in most people—even in the great. Victorian biographies, therefore, were often adjusted to the prevalent conviction that it was improper and disloyal to tell the whole truth about the dead. And though (as in many instances) the whole truth might contain nothing discreditable, Victorians still preferred, on the whole, to have the truth softened and sentimentalized. They could not rid themselves of the belief that it is indecent to look upon the naked—even upon naked truth. Moreover, they were devoted to prettiness, whether in externals or in the world of ideas.

Lytton Strachey broke into the Victorian stronghold

without apology. He had salutary things to say; he said them provocatively and without romantic embroidery. In his *Florence Nightingale*¹ the Lady of the Lamp is put away in her little niche, and a much more impressive creature is revealed—she who transformed the Army Medical Service by the irresistible force of her will operating through and upon others. She *was* the Lady of the Lamp—in her spare moments. At other times she was an Angel of Wrath armed with thunderbolts, which she never hesitated to throw. Although this was the authentic Florence Nightingale, many preferred the less authentic but more picturesque popular version. There is a romantic thrill in contemplating the sister of mercy; there is but a sense of lonely majesty in seeing her as a great administrator locked out of her natural sphere by the ‘womanly woman’ convention, and forced to use one or two loyal men who were ready to be worked to death (literally) in order that her will might be fulfilled. Knowing her as she was, how could Sidney Herbert and Arthur Hugh Clough doubt that her will was the will of God, and that their duty was to work to the end for its fulfilment? It is a fine story, finely related by Lytton Strachey.

While it is impossible to separate style from content in *Eminent Victorians*, the book is still more remarkable as a literary feat than as a representation of personal history. As tales of men and women, these are absorbing from first to last, whether the subject be Manning, Newman, Arnold of Rugby, Gladstone, or another. Yet there is less in the tale than in the telling. All these lives had been written before—but no similar thrill had previously resulted. The new brilliance and new force came from Lytton Strachey’s achievement of his purpose to make biography in England an art instead of an industry.

The preface to *Eminent Victorians* is the manifesto of the New Biography. Until Lytton Strachey wrote, biographers approached their task as though they were painstaking

¹ *Eminent Victorians*.

foreigners 'doing' the British Museum. They set their teeth and marched down every corridor, surveyed every room, deliberated in every lobby and recess. Having learned everything that could be learned, they then recorded facts and observations with verbose patience, after discreetly censoring any Pepysian resemblances. Lytton Strachey began his manifesto with a statement upon the problem of method, postulating that it is a disadvantage for any biographer to know too much about the subject of his book. Not accumulation of material, but, rather, scrupulous selection and ruthless rejection should be (Strachey considered) the primary aim. He himself chose to work upon a period already encumbered by the result of too much and too detailed research. And yet, as he looked through the heavy mass, he saw that a certain amount of available material had remained unused, and this (perversely perhaps, but naturally) seemed to him more important than the rest. It was as though he had entered a mansion wherein several cupboards were locked and sealed—as a precaution against the risk of a public display of family skeletons. Lytton Strachey at once threw open all the cupboards. The contents were interesting, but the skeletons were few. Gordon drank brandy and read the Bible; Disraeli chuckled in private over 'The Faery' Queen Victoria whom he flattered in public. Dr. Arnold believed in the Second Coming; Gladstone was a 'confusion of incompatibles'. There is nothing shocking in all this; not even (finally) in Gordon's brandy. Strachey did not suggest any shockingness; nor did he (as some pretended) depreciate the great Victorians. He presented them as men and women 'more various than nature', instead of as inanimate idols. If the historian is wise, Lytton Strachey said, 'he will attack his subject in unexpected places; he will fall upon the flank, or the rear; he will shoot a sudden, revealing searchlight into obscure recesses, hitherto undivined'.¹

¹ *Eminent Victorians*: Preface.

Nothing makes English people more uneasy than irony. Some hate it as abstainers hate alcohol. And they are right. Literature gets drunk upon irony more quickly than upon anything else. But English literature cannot live everlastingly upon a milk diet, even though it may be well that it does so most of the time. Literature has had several outbursts of glorious drunkenness, and no prohibition could prevent future repetitions. Twentieth-century biography got briskly and entertainingly drunk upon Lytton Strachey's irony. By 1925 the less mature irony of his followers had already begun to make biography fatuous.

A detailed study of Strachey's prose would be a useful undertaking, though impossible here. His style is not unexceptionable. Its serpentinings appear to be, at first glance, a part of the general intoxication; but no such conclusion should be hurriedly drawn. If the winding sentences were made straight by reducing the number of adjectives and qualifying phrases, the 'superfluous' words would often carry away with them that pervasive irony which runs through every line and is the spirit of Lytton Strachey's prose. In the quotation below, omission of any of the words enclosed within square brackets might result in economy, but it would also be inharmonious with the whole design of the essay to which the sentence belongs:

A minority of [susceptible and serious] youths fell completely under his sway, responded [like wax] to [the pressure of] his influence, and moulded their [whole] lives [with passionate reverence] upon the teaching of their [adored] master.¹

As Lytton Strachey's pages are read with attention, the feeling grows stronger that most of the adjectives and epithets have been fitted in place with deliberation. As the narrative sweeps onwards, every second sentence, almost, appears to have a sting in its tail.² Strachey has

¹ Dr. Arnold (*Eminent Victorians*).

² e.g., 'When Newman was a child he "wished that he could believe the Arabian Nights were true". When he came to be a man, his wish seems to have been granted.'—(*Cardinal Manning: Eminent Victorians*).

his beautiful passages, also—as in the final paragraph of *Queen Victoria* (1921).

The calculated effects of Lytton Strachey's books were hardened into a formula by other biographers. The originality of the opening of *The End of General Gordon*,¹ with its sudden 'fall upon the flank' of the subject, was particularly attractive to other writers,² with some of whom it became an imitative trick.

Philip Guedalla, if not a disciple of Lytton Strachey, at least shared his principles. Strachey refers to biography as 'the most delicate and humane of all the branches of the art of writing';³ Guedalla says: 'Biography is the painting of portraits . . . and it is impossible to paint them without a touch of art'.⁴ Strachey writes that the old-style biographies, 'one is tempted to suppose, . . . were composed by the undertaker, as the final item of his job'; Guedalla, that biographies have often been 'dismal products in which the official biographer vies with the monumental mason'.

Lytton Strachey's books not only have literary attraction; they are also informative to ordinary men and women. Philip Guedalla, on the other hand, writes as though for an audience of experts, and is in constant danger of breaking his shins over his own wit. With him, *manner* is all; with Strachey, only a part. There are facts in abundance behind the scenes of Guedalla's *Palmerston* (1926), but these are seldom allowed on the stage, because the author is monopolizing it most of the time. His performance, dazzling at first, becomes tiresome with repetition, and nerve-racking as he grows hilarious. In the War Office chapter of *Palmerston* the first section closes thus:

The French sentries in their bearskins stiffened to salute, as marshals clanked by in blue and gold; and three hundred miles

¹ *Eminent Victorians*.

² Cf. the openings of *Byron: The Last Journey*, by Harold Nicolson (1924); and *Parnell*, by St. John Ervine (1925).

³ *Eminent Victorians*.

⁴ General introduction to *Curiosities of Politics* series (1925).

away Palmerston, fresh from Cambridge, touched a civilian hat to the mounted sentries in Whitehall and climbed a dark staircase to plumb the mysteries of the War Department.

This cinematographic device of the 'flash back', calling the audience to 'look here upon this picture, and on this', is enlivening—once. But used at the end of four successive sections in one chapter (and frequently elsewhere in the book), it is embarrassing. Guedalla was capable of sense and brilliance together; but he 'played about' with words, recalling the worst mannerisms of Oscar Wilde, Chesterton and Lytton Strachey. He employs as many adjectives as Strachey, but in Guedalla's use of them they are intrusive, not indispensable. His sentences also (like Strachey's) lift their tails—but often only to wag harmlessly where they were meant to sting.

Despite these innovators, dull journeyman biographies continued to appear in large numbers annually, and of the whole mass of biographical writing only a few further titles need be given: St. John Ervine's *Parnell* (1925), Lord David Cecil's *The Stricken Deer* (1929; a life of Cowper) and *The Young Melbourne* (1939), Duff Cooper's *Talleyrand* (1932), Liddell Hart's *Sherman* (1929) and *Foch* (1931). The art of biography survived in these.

Though most of the credit for partially disestablishing the mortuary-puff type of biography has deservedly gone to Lytton Strachey, the importance in a similar connexion of Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* (1907) has been emphasized by Harold Nicolson in *The Development of English Biography* (1927). Gosse (1849–1928) was born into the atmosphere of stern piety sustained by the Plymouth Brethren, an English Evangelical Protestant fellowship established in the nineteenth century. His father, Philip Gosse, was an eminent marine naturalist who found no difficulty in being at once a scientist and a believer in the literal authenticity of the Bible from cover to cover. *Father and Son* is a precise

account of the upbringing of Edmund Gosse in an environment which at an early age he found spiritually stifling, and of the differences on fundamental matters which developed between himself and his father after the death of his mother. The book, Gosse's one masterpiece, gave offence to the many who, in 1907, still clung to the view that parents were sacrosanct and beyond criticism by their children. When that dogma disintegrated, the sensitive affection displayed in *Father and Son* and its literary excellence received general recognition, and its place in literature is assured on its high merit as a piece of writing and on its significance as a pioneer work demonstrating that a love of truth concerning men and women does not imply any lack of love for the men and women themselves.

As the twentieth century proceeded, more and more interest was taken in the make-up of individual character, an interest stimulated by the studies of foreign psychologists, chiefly Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), whose inquiries into the significance of dreams led to the theory and practice of psycho-analysis and the casting-off of inhibitions. Whereas in the nineteenth century personal reticence had been a mark of good breeding, the early twentieth century was much too interested in the motives and mechanism of human conduct to maintain such reticence. Every fragment of information about human behaviour was potentially illuminating, and substantially gratifying also to that hungry curiosity which gnawed at many modern people. The decay of religion, moreover, dammed that impulse to self-revelation which is exercised in the Confessional, and what was formerly related to the priest alone was now without shame publicized in many a written autobiography. The *Diary* of Samuel Pepys became a more popular classic than it had been at any time before, and its frankness was outdone by numerous twentieth-century diarists and autobiographers. The desire to 'come clean' was widespread and often genuine, though, here and there, a strain of exhibitionism might be suspected.

It is of the essence of autobiography that the author's style should have an easy intimacy in harmony with the originating impulse which prompted the writer. Autobiographers fail and stultify themselves if they hold the reader at arm's length, though the record may still have a factual interest.

Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* (1905) and George Gissing's *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903) have the requisite degree of intimacy in their differing ways, but whereas Wilde's is a book with the shade of the prison house on it—a record of agony but with some attitudinizing—Gissing's is largely a joyous celebration of escape from the humiliations of poverty and drudgery. In *The Journal of a Disappointed Man* (1919) W. N. P. Barbellion (pseudonym of Bruce Frederick Cummings, 1889–1917) analyses his thoughts and sensations with the precision befitting a scientist, yet he combined literary attractiveness with exactitude and avoided morbidity, though many of the entries in his journal allude to the progress of the incurable disease which was slowly killing him. There is a high element of originality and charm in Siegfried Sassoon's sensitive personal records, *The Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928) and *The Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), but T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926), notwithstanding the fame of its author and the sensational excitement raised by his book, is only a constipated masterpiece. If Lawrence had written this remarkable work before he, very deliberately, learned how to write, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* might well have been as great an original achievement in literature as his desert campaign was in the annals of military history. But prolonged wrestling with words preparatory to writing his story, and overmuch attention to other people's advice (including Bernard Shaw's), hobbled his personal genius and led him into mere eclecticism. That he possessed natural genius as a writer is proved by his letters (*Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, edited by David Garnett, 1938), in which alone posterity

will be able to get close to a man who, after his brilliant achievement with the Arabs in wartime, was frustrated in peacetime both from without and within, and was destroyed prematurely (in a motor-cycle crash) by the passion he had developed for speed—a passion through which he appeared at last to find the sole appropriate exercise for his own swift and rare spirit.

The Letters of D. H. Lawrence (1932) added only minor details to the already more than lifesize portrait of himself that existed in the novels, stories, and poems, but, nevertheless, the portrait is incomplete without those last touches provided by the letters.

Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw: A Correspondence (1931) was a delicious unheralded surprise. The friendship of the great player and the great playwright was conducted through its deepest and most lyrical phases without a personal meeting; when at length they did meet something died in the letters and the fire dwindled. But the book is a human as well as a literary treasure, and only a proper recognition of her genius as a woman, apart from her sublime gifts as an actress, can explain how Ellen Terry in these letters is always, even intellectually, Shaw's equal. That it appears so may be due in part also to Shaw's exquisite tact. There was something in each that, while the correspondence flourished, brought out the best in both—her sensibility and intelligence and wit, his sympathy, understanding, and natural tenderness.

The interest of H. G. Wells's *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), J. M. Barrie's *The Greenwood Hat* (1937), and Rudyard Kipling's *Something of Myself* (1937) is less in the books themselves than in the contemporary eminence of their writers; even Wells, though telling all, tells virtually nothing. George Moore's *Hail and Farewell* (1911-14) has previously been mentioned (*ante*, p. 64) as a masterpiece of indiscretion.

Havelock Ellis's *My Life* (1940) will be judged better at a distance in time. Written at intervals over a period of

forty years, this book was intended by the author to be a major work of art as well as a meticulous essay in personal examination. Its length and concentration preclude hasty judgment. It was, at a first reading, disappointing—seeming unbalanced in its parts, uncoördinated, and unrevealing in any exact sense. Havelock Ellis (1859–1939) had become both notorious and famous with his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1910–28), but he was a man of letters as well as a scientist and the author of several first-rate volumes of essays. In more informal moods he jotted down the journal entries which make up the three series of *Impressions and Comments* (1914, 1921, 1924), from which more may be learned of the true Havelock Ellis than from *My Life*.



INDEX

§ 1. AUTHOR INDEX WITH BOOK-LISTS

The titles of characteristic books are given under most of the authors' names below. Not all of these are mentioned in the text of this volume, where, however, references to other works may be found (see § 2 of Index)

ABERCROMBIE, LASCELLES (1881-1939), 219

The Idea of Great Poetry, 1925
Collected Poems, 1930
The Sale of St. Thomas, 1931

'A. E.' see RUSSELL, GEORGE

ALDINGTON, RICHARD (1892-)
12, 65, 194

Collected Poems, 1929
Death of a Hero, 1929
All Men Are Enemies, 1933

ALLEN, GRANT (1848-99), 14

ALLINGHAM, MARGERY, 82
Flowers for the Judge, 1936

'ALPHA OF THE PLOUGH', see GARDINER, A. G.

ANTHONY', 'C. L., see SMITH, DODIE

ARNIM, COUNTESS VON, see 'ELIZABETH'

AUDEN, W. H. (1907-), 2,
121, 199, 201

Poems, 1930
Look, Stranger! 1936

with Louis MacNiece

Letters from Iceland, 1937

with Christopher Isherwood

The Dog Beneath the Skin, 1935
The Ascent of F.6, 1936
On the Frontier, 1938

BAILEY, H. C., 79, 82

Mr. Fortune's Case Book, 1936

BALDERSTON, J. L., 135

with J. C. Squire

Berkeley Square, 1928

BARBELLION', 'W. N. P. [BRUCE
FREDERICK CUMMINGS],
(1889-1917), 241

*The Journal of a Disappointed
Man*, 1919

BARKER, H. GRANVILLE (1877-
) , 105, 116-18

*Three Plays (The Marrying of
Ann Leete; The Voysey
Inheritance; Waste)*, 1909
The Madras House, 1911

BARRIE (SIR) J. M. (1860-1937),
121 ff., 242

Quality Street, 1901
The Admirable Crichton, 1903
What Every Woman Knows,
1908
The Twelve Pound Look, 1913
A Kiss for Cinderella, 1916
Dear Brutus, 1917
Mary Rose, 1920
The Boy David, 1938

BARRON, OSWALD ['The Lon-
doner'] (died 1939), 208-9
Day In and Day Out, 1924

- BATES, H. E., 69
The Fallow Land, 1932
Thirty Tales, 1934
Through the Woods, 1936
Down the River, 1937
- BEERBOHM (SIR) MAX (1872-),
 202 ff., 213
The Works of Max Beerbohm,
 1896
More, 1899
Yet Again, 1909
Zuleika Dobson, 1911
A Christmas Garland, 1912
Seven Men, 1919
And Even Now, 1920
- BELL, ADRIAN, 226
Corduroy, 1930
Silver Ley, 1931
The Cherry Tree, 1932
 (The three in one volume,
 1936)
- BELL, GERTRUDE (1868-1926), 233
The Desert and the Sown, 1907
Amurath to Amurath, 1911
Letters, 1927
Earlier Letters, 1937
- BELLOC, HILAIRE (1870-),
 166, 228 ff., 233
Danton, 1899
The Path to Rome, 1902
The Four Men, 1902
Esto Perpetua, 1906
The Eye-Witness, 1908
On Nothing, 1908
A Conversation with a Cat, 1931
A Shorter History of England,
 1934
Sonnets and Verse, 1938
Cautionary Verses (collected
 humorous poems), 1939
- BENSON, STELLA (1892-1934), 78-9
I'Pose, 1915
Living Alone, 1919
The Poor Man, 1922
The Little World, 1925
Tobit Transplanted, 1931
- BENTLEY, E. C. (1875-), 81
Trent's Last Case, 1913
- BERESFORD, J. D., 53
The History of Jacob Stahl, 1911
The House in Demetrius Road,
 1914
Writing Aloud, 1928
- BENNETT, ARNOLD (1867-1931),
 28 ff., 52, 75-6, 128-9
Buried Alive, 1908
The Old Wives' Tale, 1908
Clayhanger, 1910
The Card, 1911
Milestones, 1912
Riceman Steps, 1923
Imperial Palace, 1930
- BLUNDEN, EDMUND (1896-),
 13, 186-8
The Poems of Edmund Blunden,
 1930
Undertones of War, 1928
- BOWEN, ELIZABETH, 69, 80
Friends and Relations, 1931
Death of the Heart, 1938
- BRIDGE, ANN, 79
Peking Picnic, 1932
- BRIDGES, ROBERT (1844-1930),
 Poet Laureate, 139 ff., 195,
 198
Collected Poems (excluding the
 plays and the following):
The Testament of Beauty, 1929
The Spirit of Man (anthology),
 1916
Collected Essays, 1927
- BRIDIE, JAMES (1888-), 136-7
The Anatomist, 1931
Tobias and the Angel, 1931
Jonah and the Whale, 1932
A Sleeping Clergyman, 1933
Susannah and the Elders, 1938

- BRIGHOUSE, HAROLD, 118
Hobson's Choice, 1916
- BRITTAIN, VERA, 17, 77
Testament of Friendship, 1940
- BROOKE, RUPERT (1887-1915), 2,
 9, 166 ff., 172-3, 182
Collected Poems, 1918
- BURNETT, I. COMPTON, 79
Brothers and Sisters, 1929
- BUTLER, SAMUEL (1835-1902), 7
Erewhon, 1872
The Way of All Flesh, 1903
Notebooks, 1912
- CAMPBELL, ROY (1902-), 166
The Flaming Terrapin, 1924
The Wayzgoose, 1928
Adamastor, 1930
The Georgiad, 1931
Taurine Province, 1932
Flowering Reeds, 1933
Flowering Rifle, 1939
- CAUDWELL, CHRISTOPHER, 16
- CECIL (LORD) DAVID (1902-),
 239
The Stricken Deer, 1929
The Young Melbourne, 1939
- CHESTERTON, G. K. (1872-1936),
 79, 81, 165-6, 174, 213-14,
 228, 229, 239
Collected Poems, 1933
Alarms and Discursions, 1910
The Father Brown Stories (col-
 lected edition), 1929
'All I Survey', 1933
- CHRISTIE, AGATHA, 82
An Agatha Christie Omnibus,
 1931
- CLARE, JOHN (1793-1864), 187
- COLLINS, WILKIE (1824-89), 80
The Moonstone, 1868
- CONRAD, JOSEPH (1857-1924), 7,
 42 ff., 52, 62, 65, 68, 203,
 204-5
The Nigger of the 'Narcissus',
 1897
Lord Jim, 1900
Youth, 1902
Typhoon, 1903
Nostromo, 1904
The Mirror of the Sea, 1906
A Personal Record, 1912
'Twixt Land and Sea, 1912
Chance, 1914
Victory, 1915
The Rescue, 1920
- COOPER, A. DUFF (1890-), 239
Talleyrand, 1932
- COPPARD, A. E. (1878-), 69
Clorinda Walks in Heaven, 1922
Collected Poems, 1928
The Field of Mustard, 1926
Ninepenny Flute, 1937
- COUCH, *see* QUILLER-COUCH
- COWARD, NOEL (1899-), 15,
 132-4
 Collected Plays:
Play Parade (I), 1934
Play Parade (II), 1939
To-night at 8.30, 1936
Present Indicative (autobio-
 graphy), 1937
- CROFTS, FREEMAN WILLS, 82
Inspector French's Case Book,
 1928
- CRONIN, A. J. (1896-), 66-7
Hatter's Castle, 1931
The Stars Look Down, 1935
The Citadel, 1937
- CUMMINGS, BRUCE FREDERICK, *see*
 BARBELLION', 'W. N. P.

CUNNINGHAM, GRAHAM, *see*
GRAHAM, R. B. CUNNING-
HAME

DANE, CLEMENCE, 79, 129-31
Regiment of Women, 1917
A Bill of Divorcement, 1921
Will Shakespeare, 1921
Adam's Opera, 1928
Broome Stages, 1931

DAVIES, W. H. (1871-1940), 182-5
Autobiography of a Super-tramp,
1908
The Poems of W. H. Davies,
1934

DE LA MARE, WALTER (1873-)
67, 179-81
Poems, 1901-1918, 1920
The Memoirs of a Midget, 1921
Come Hither, 1923
Broomsticks and other Tales,
1925
Poems, 1919-1934, 1935
Memory and other Poems, 1938
Behold, This Dreamer, 1939

DICKENS, CHARLES, 1, 2, 18, 52,
66, 213, 214

DOBREE, BONAMY, 58

DONNE, JOHN, 196, 197-8, 199

DOOLITTLE, HILDA, *see* 'H. D.'

DOUGHTY, CHARLES (1843-1926),
158, 233
Travels in Arabia Deserta, 1888
The Dawn in Britain, 1906
The Cliffs, 1909
Mansoul, 1920

DOYLE, A. CONAN (1859-1930),
80-1
Adventures of Sherlock Holmes,
1891

DRINKWATER, JOHN (1882-1937),
120-1

Poems, 1908-1914, 1917
Abraham Lincoln, 1918
Bird in Hand, 1927
Summer Harvest: Poems, 1924-
1933, 1933

DUNNE, J. W., 135
An Experiment with Time, 1927
The Serial Universe, 1934
The New Immortality, 1938

EASTAWAY', 'EDWARD, *see* THOMAS,
EDWARD

ELIOT, T. S. (1888-), 9, 137-8,
197-8, 200, 220
Homage to John Dryden, 1924
Poems, 1909-25, 1925
For Lancelot Andrewes, 1928
Dante, 1929
Murder in the Cathedral, 1935

ELLIS, HAVELOCK (1859-1939),
242-3
Impressions and Comments, 3
series, 1914, 1921, 1924
My Life, 1940

'ELIZABETH' [*née* Beauchamp;
became Countess von
Arnim; afterwards Countess
Russell], 79
*Elizabeth and Her German
Garden*, 1898
The Enchanted April, 1923

ERVINE, ST. JOHN (1883-),
111-12, 239
Mixed Marriage, 1911
Jane Clegg, 1914
John Ferguson, 1915
The Ship, 1922
The First Mrs. Fraser, 1929
Robert's Wife, 1938

- FLECKER, JAMES ELROY (1884-1915), 178-9
Collected Poems, 1916
Hassan, 1922
- FLEMING, PETER, 233
Brazilian Adventure, 1933
News from Tartary, 1936
- FLINT, F. S., 194
Cadences, 1915
Otherworld, 1920
- FORESTER, C. S., 69
Brown on Resolution, 1929
Captain Hornblower, 1939 (comprising *The Happy Return*, *A Ship of the Line*, and *Flying Colours*)
- FORSTER, E. M. (1879-), 17, 64, 75, 77
A Room with a View, 1908
Howard's End, 1910
The Celestial Omnibus, 1911
A Passage to India, 1924
Abinger Harvest, 1936
- FRASER, RONALD, 66
The Flying Draper, 1924
Rose Anstey, 1930
Miss Lucifer, 1939
- FREEMAN, AUSTIN, 82
The Famous Cases of Dr. Thorn-dyke, 1929
- FREEMAN, JOHN (1880-1929), 178
Collected Poems, 1928
Last Poems, 1930
- FREUD, SIGMUND, 70, 240
- GALSWORTHY, JOHN (1867-1933), 25-6, 36 ff., 52, 53, 100 ff., 116, 118, 120-1
A Man of Property, 1906
The Patrician, 1911
The Inn of Tranquillity, 1912
- GALSWORTHY, JOHN—contd.
The Forsyte Chronicles:
The Forsyte Saga, 1922
A Modern Comedy, 1929
On Forsyte Change, 1930
Caravan (collected short stories), 1925
Collected Plays, 1929
- GARDINER, A. G. ['Alpha of the Plough'], 211-12, 234
Prophets, Priests, and Kings, 1908
Pebbles on the Shore, 1916
- GARNETT, DAVID (1892-), 65, 241
Lady Into Fox, 1922
A Man in the Zoo, 1924
- GIBBONS, STELLA, 73
Cold Comfort Farm, 1932
- GIBSON, W. W. (1878-), 173, 177-8
Collected Poems, 1905-1925, 1926
Coming and Going, 1938
- GISSING, GEORGE (1857-1903), 214, 241
Born in Exile, 1892
Charles Dickens, 1898
The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft, 1903
- GOLDING, LOUIS (1895-), 66
Magnolia Street, 1932
- GOSSE (SIR) EDMUND (1849-1928), 239-40
Father and Son, 1907
Collected Poems, 1911
- GRAHAM, R. B. CUNNINGHAME (1852-1936), 222, 226 ff.
Thirteen Stories, 1900
Success, 1902
Progress, 1905
His People, 1906
Scottish Stories, 1914

GRANVILLE-BARKER, HARLEY, *see*
BARKER, H. GRANVILLE

GRAVES, ROBERT (1895-), 55,
189-91

Collected Poems, 1938

GREENWOOD, WALTER, 13, 66-7
Love on the Dole, 1933

GREGORY, LADY (1852-1932), 107,
109, 111
Seven Short Plays, 1909
New Comedies, 1913

GRINFELL, JULIAN (1888-1915), 9,
169-70
Into Battle, 1915

GUEDALLA, PHILIP (1889-),
238-9
Palmerston, 1926

HANKIN, ST. JOHN, 116
Three Plays with Happy Endings,
1907

HANLEY, JAMES (1901-), 68
Captain Bottell, 1933
The Furys, 1934

HARDY, THOMAS (1840-1928), 7,
32, 96, 149, 150ff., 184,
214, 230
Novels, 1871-1897
The Dynasty, 1904-8
Collected Poems, 1930

HART, B. H. LIDDELL (1895-),
239
Sherman, 1930
T. E. Lawrence in Arabia and
After, 1934

'H. D.' [Hilda Doolittle], 194
Sea Garden, 1916
Hymen, 1921
Heliodora, 1924

HENLEY, W. E. (1849-1903), 9

HERBERT, A. P. (1890-), 66
The Water Gipsies, 1930
A Book of Ballads, 1931
Uncommon Law, 1935

HEWLETT, MAURICE (1861-1923),
55, 188, 217-18
The Forest Lovers, 1898
The Life and Death of Richard
Yea-and-Nay, 1900
Halfway House, 1908
Open Country, 1909
Rest Harrow, 1910
The Song of the Plow, 1916
In a Green Shade, 1920
Wiltshire Essays, 1921
Extemporary Essays, 1922
Last Essays, 1924

HODGSON, RALPH, 174-6
Poems, 1917

HOLTBY, WINIFRED (1899-1936),
17, 77-8
Anderby Wold, 1923
Poor Caroline, 1931
South Riding, 1936
Letters to a Friend, 1937

HOPKINS, GERARD MANLEY (1844-
89), 198
Poems (enlarged edition), 1930
Letters, 1935

HORNIMAN, MISS A. E. F., 108, 115,
118-19

HOUGHTON, CLAUDE, 68
I Am Jonathan Scrivener, 1930

HOUGHTON, STANLEY (1881-1913),
118-19
The Younger Generation, 1910
Hindle Wakes, 1912

- HOUSMAN, A. E. (1859-1936),
148-9
A Shropshire Lad, 1896
Last Poems, 1922
Collected Poems, 1939
- HUDSON, W. H. (1841-1922), 222 ff.
Green Mansions, 1904
Afoot in England, 1909
A Shepherd's Life, 1910
Far Away and Long Ago, 1918
- HUXLEY, ALDOUS (1894-), 15,
58, 61
Crome Yellow, 1921
Antic Hay, 1923
Jesting Pilate, 1926
Point Counter Point, 1928
Brave New World, 1932
- IBSEN, HENRIK, 85, 91-2, 132
- ISHERWOOD, CHRISTOPHER (1904-
), 121, 201
The Memorial, 1932
Mr. Norris Changes Trains,
1935
Lions and Shadows, 1938
And see under AUDEN, W. H.
- JAMES, HENRY, 52, 135
- JEFFERIES, RICHARD, 226
- JESSE, F. TENNYSON, 79
Tom Fool, 1926
The Lacquer Lady, 1929
- JONES, HENRY ARTHUR (1851-
1929), 86
The Silver King, 1882
The Liars, 1901
- JOYCE, JAMES (1882-1941), 2, 29,
62-3
Chamber Music, 1907
Dubliners, 1914
*Portrait of the Artist as a Young
Man*, 1917
Ulysses, 1922
Finnegan's Wake, 1939
- KIPLING, RUDYARD, (1865-1936),
9, 69, 142 ff., 155, 161, 242
Kim, 1901
Puck of Pook's Hill, 1906
Collected Verse 1912 (and several
later enlarged editions)
Something of Myself, 1937
- KAYE-SMITH, SHEILA, 72-3
Sussex Gorse, 1916
Joanna Godden, 1921
- LAMB, CHARLES, 207, 210
- LAWRENCE, D. H. (1885-1930),
14-15, 54, 57 ff., 242
Sons and Lovers, 1913
Kangaroo, 1923
Collected Poems, 1929
The Man Who Died, 1930
Letters, 1932
- LAWRENCE, T. E. (1888-1935), 65,
66, 233, 241
Seven Pillars of Wisdom, 1926
Letters, 1938
- LEDWIDGE, FRANCIS, 170-I
Complete Poems, 1919
- LEHMANN, ROSAMOND, 79
Dusty Answer, 1927
- LEWIS, C. DAY (1904-), 16-17,
199-201
A Hope for Poetry, 1934
Collected Poems, 1935
- LINKLATER, ERIC (1899-),
68-9
White Maa's Saga, 1929
Juan in America, 1931
- LONDONER', 'THE, see BARRON,
OSWALD
- LUBBOCK, PERCY, 218-19
The Craft of Fiction, 1921
Earlham, 1922

- LUCAS, E. V. (1868-1938), 207 ff.
Life of Charles Lamb, 1905
Listener's Lure, 1906
Character and Comedy, 1907
Over Bemerton's, 1908
Loiterer's Harvest, 1913
- LYND, ROBERT ['Y. Y.'] (1879-), 209, 212
The Pleasures of Ignorance, 1921
- MACAULAY, ROSE, 3, 35, 73-4
Potterism, 1920
Dangerous Ages, 1921
Told by an Idiot, 1923
They Were Defeated, 1932
- MACKENZIE, COMPTON (1883-), 52-3
Sinister Street, 1913-14
- MACKENZIE, RONALD, 137
Musical Chairs, 1932
- MAGNEICE, LOUIS (1907-), 199, 201
Poems, 1935
Autumn Journal, 1939
 with W. H. Auden
Letters from Iceland, 1937
- MANNING, FREDERICK (died 1935), 65
Her Privates We, 1930
- MANSFIELD, KATHERINE (1888-1923), 69, 78
Bliss, 1920
The Garden Party, 1922
Journal, 1927
Letters, 1928
Scrapbook, 1939
- MARE, WALTER DE LA, *see* DE LA MARE, WALTER
- MARSH (SIR) EDWARD, 167, 173, 174
- MARTYN, EDWARD, 107
- MASEFIELD, JOHN (1878-),
Poet Laureate, 67, 116, 127-8, 137, 140, 162-5, 174
Saltwater Ballads, 1902
Multitude and Solitude, 1909
The Tragedy of Nan, 1909
Collected Poems 1923 (and later enlarged editions)
- MASON, A. E. W. (1865-), 82
The Four Feathers, 1902
The House of the Arrow, 1924
- MAUGHAM, W. SOMERSET (1874-), 55-7, 69, 131-2, 134
Of Human Bondage, 1915
The Moon and Sixpence, 1919
Cakes and Ale, 1930
Collected Plays (4 vols.), 1932
Altogether, 1934
- MEREDITH, GEORGE, 7, 52, 75, 124, 139, 159
- MEYNELL, ALICE (1847-1922), 195, 215-17, 218
Collected Poems, 1913
Collected Essays, 1914
Last Poems, 1923
- MITCHELL, GLADYS, 82
Death at the Opera, 1934
- MITCHISON, NAOMI, 55
The Conquered, 1923
When the Bough Breaks, 1924
Cloud Cuckoo Land, 1925
The Corn King and the Spring Queen, 1931
- MONKHOUSE, ALLAN, 118
- MONRO, HAROLD (1879-1932), 173, 181
Collected Poems, 1933

- MONTAGUE, C. E. (1867-1928), 12,
13, 144
A Hind Let Loose, 1910
Disenchantment, 1922
- MOORE, GEORGE (1852-1933),
64-5, 242
Esther Waters, 1894
Hail and Farewell, 1911-13
The Brook Kerith, 1916
Heloïse and Abelard, 1921
- MORGAN, CHARLES (1894-),
68, 137
The Fountain, 1932
Epitaph on George Moore, 1935
The Flashing Stream, 1938
- MURRY, JOHN MIDDLETON, 78
- MYERS, L. H. (1881-), 67-8
The Root and the Flower, 1935
Strange Glory, 1936
- NICOLSON, HAROLD, 239
- NOYES, ALFRED (1880-),
161-2
Collected Poems, 1910 (and
various later editions)
- O'CASEY, SEAN (1884-),
113-14
Juno and the Paycock, 1925
The Plough and the Stars,
1926
The Silver Tassie, 1928
Within the Gates, 1933
- OWEN, WILFRED (1893-1918), 9,
172
Poems, 1920; enlarged ed. 1931
- OMMANNEY, F. D., 233
South Latitude, 1938
- PHILLIPS, STEPHEN (1864-1915)
86-7, 121
- PINERO (SIR) A. W. (1855-1934),
85-6, 129
The Second Mrs. Tanqueray,
1895
Trelawney of the 'Wells', 1899
His House in Order, 1906
- POE, EDGAR ALLAN (1809-49), 80
- POUND, EZRA (1885-), 194
Collected Poems, 1926
- POWYS, T. F. (1875-), 66
Mr. Weston's Good Wine, 1927
- PRIESTLEY, J. B. (1894-), 13,
66, 134-6, 203
The Good Companions, 1929
Dangerous Corner, 1932
Eden End, 1934
English Journey, 1934
Cornelius, 1935
Time and the Conways, 1937
Midnight on the Desert, 1937
Johnson Over Jordan, 1939
Rain Upon Godshill, 1939
- QUILLER-COUGH (SIR) ARTHUR
(1863-), 219-20
On the Art of Reading, 1920
- RICHARDS, I. A., 220, 221
Principles of Literary Criticism,
1925
Practical Criticism, 1929
- RICHARDSON, DOROTHY, 29, 62-3,
70
Pilgrimage, 1938
(4 vols., containing 12
parts)
- ROBERTS, MICHAEL, 199
- ROBERTSON, E. ARNOT, 79
Three Came Unarmed, 1929
Ordinary Families, 1933
- ROBERTSON, T. W. (1829-1871),
84-5

- ROBINS, ELIZABETH (1862-),
69-70
The Magnetic North, 1904
- ROBINSON, LENNOX (1886-),
111, 112
- RUSKIN, JOHN, I, 4
- RUSSELL, GEORGE ['A. E.'] (1867-
1935), 107
- SACKVILLE-WEST, VICTORIA (VITA)
(1892-), 79, 188
The Land, 1926
The Edwardians, 1930
All Passion Spent, 1931
- SASSOON, SIEGFRIED (1886-),
9, 171, 181, 241
Counter Attack, 1918
The Heart's Journey, 1928
*Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting
Man*, 1928
Memoirs of an Infantry Officer,
1930
Vigils, 1935
- SAYERS, DOROTHY L. (1893-),
79, 80, 81-2, 137
Murder Must Advertise, 1933
Gaudy Night, 1935
The Zeal of Thy House, 1937
- SHAW, G. BERNARD (1856-),
5-6, 7, 16, 85, 87 ff., 115,
116, 117, 118, 126, 132,
202, 203, 241, 242
- Novels:
Immaturity, written 1879
The Irrational Knot, 1880
Love Among the Artists, 1881
Cashel Byron's Profession, 1882
An Unsocial Socialist, 1883
- Collected Plays*, 1931
(and later enlarged editions)
Collected Prefaces, 1934
- SHERRIFF, R. C., 13
Journey's End, 1928
- SINCLAIR, MAY (1879-), 70-1
The Divine Fire, 1904
Mary Olivier, 1919
- SITWELL, EDITH (1887-),
192-3
Collected Poems, 1930
- SITWELL, OSBERT (1892-),
192-4
Collected Satires and Poems, 1931
- SITWELL, SACHIEVERELL (1900-
) , 198
Collected Poems, 1936
- SMITH, DODIE ['G. L. ANTHONY'],
137
Autumn Crocus, 1930
Call It a Day, 1935
Dear Octopus, 1938
- SPENDER, STEPHEN (1909-),
199, 201
Poems (2nd edn.), 1934
- SQUIRE (SIR) J. C. (1884-),
135, 203, 213
- STARK, FREYA, 233
The Southern Gates of Arabia,
1936
Baghdad Sketches, 1937
Seen in the Hadhramaut, 1938
- STEPHENS, JAMES (1882-),
176-7
The Crock of Gold, 1912
Collected Poems, 1926
- STERN, G. B., 79
The Rakonitz Chronicles, 1934
- STERNE, LAURENCE, 22, 75
- STEVENSON, ROBERT LOUIS, 209

- STRACHEY, LYTTON (1880-1932),
206, 234ff., 239
Eminent Victorians, 1918
Queen Victoria, 1921
Elizabeth and Essex, 1928
- STREET, A. G., 226
Farmer's Glory, 1932
- SWINBURNE, 4, 5, 139, 206
- SWINNERTON, FRANK, 53
Nocturne, 1917
Shops and Houses, 1918
The Georgian Literary Scene, 1935
Swinerton: an Autobiography,
1937
- SYNGE, J. M. (1871-1909), 109-11,
163
The Shadow of the Glen, 1905
Riders to the Sea, 1905
*The Playboy of the Western
World*, 1907
The Tinker's Wedding, 1908
- TENNYSON, 1, 2, 4, 7, 9, 139
- TERRY, (DAME) ELLEN, 242
*Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw:
A Correspondence*, 1931
- THOMAS, EDWARD ['EDWARD EASTA-
WAY'] (1878-1917), 185-6
Collected Poems, 1922
- TOLSTOY, 60, 214
- TROTTER, JACQUELINE, 171
Valour and Vision, 1920
- VEDRENNE, J. E., 116
- WADDELL, HELEN, 65
The Wandering Scholars, 1927
Medieval Latin Lyrics, 1933
Peter Abelard, 1933
The Desert Fathers, 1936
- WALLACE, EDGAR (1875-1932), 81
- WALPOLE (SIR) HUGH (1884-1941),
53-4
Mr. Perrin and Mr. Traill, 1911
Fortitude, 1913
Jeremy, 1919
The Cathedral, 1922
The Herries Chronicle, 1939
Roman Fountain, 1940
- WARNER, SYLVIA TOWNSHEND, 79
Lolly Willowes, 1926
- WELLS, H. G. (1866-), 2, 5, 7,
14, 18ff., 35, 36, 43, 52,
69, 95, 102, 203, 204, 242
The Time Machine, 1895
The Invisible Man, 1897
Love and Mr. Lewisham, 1900
Kipps, 1905
The War in the Air, 1908
Tono-Bungay, 1909
The History of Mr. Polly, 1910
Marriage, 1912
The Outline of History, 1919
*The Work, Wealth, and Happi-
ness of Mankind*, 1932
The Shape of Things to Come,
1933
- WEST, REBECCA, 80, 213
The Return of the Soldier, 1918
The Strange Necessity, 1928
The Thinking Reed, 1936
- WHITAKER, MALACHI, 69
Frost in April, 1932
- WILDE, OSCAR (1856-1900), 7, 86,
205, 239, 241
The Importance of Being Earnest,
1895
De Profundis, 1905
- WILLIAMS, CHARLES (1886-),
67, 137, 195-6.
The Silver Stair, 1912
Windows of Night, 1925
A Myth of Shakespeare, 1928
The Place of the Lion, 1931
The English Poetic Mind, 1932
Queen Elizabeth, 1936
Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury,
1936

WINTER, KEITH, 137

WOLFE, HUMBERT (1885-1940),
166, 195

Kensington Gardens, 1924

News of the Devil, 1926

Requiem, 1927

WOOLF, VIRGINIA (died 1941), 2, 9,
63, 74ff.

The Voyage Out, 1915

Jacob's Room, 1922

The Common Reader, 1925

Mrs. Dalloway, 1925

Orlando, 1928

A Room of One's Own, 1929

The Waves, 1931

Flush, 1933

The Years, 1937

YEATS, W. B. (1865-1939), 106ff.,
112, 145ff.

Poems, 1895

YEATS, W. B.—*contd.*

The Wind Among the Reeds,
1899

Poems: 2nd Series, 1910

Later Poems, 1922

Last Poems and Plays, 1940

YOUNG, E. H., 80

William, 1925

Miss Mole, 1930

YOUNG, FRANCIS BRETT (1884-
) , 54

Deep Sea, 1914

The Iron Age, 1916

The Young Physician, 1919

Portrait of Clare, 1927

They Seek a Country, 1937

Dr. Bradley Remembers, 1938

The City of Gold, 1939

'Y. Y.', see LYND, ROBERT

§ 2. WORKS MENTIONED IN THE TEXT

Italics are used for titles of books, plays, and long poems which were at first separately issued. Titles of individual poems and essays forming part of a collective volume are given in roman type.

Aaron's Rod, 59
Abinger Harvest, 64
Abraham Lincoln, 120, 121
Absent-Minded Beggar, The, 142
Adam's Opera, 130-1
Admirable Crichton, The, 123
Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven, 147
After Many a Summer, 61
Alarm, The, 158
Alice Sit-by-the-Fire, 122
Alive and Kicking Ned, 67
All Men are Enemies, 65
Almayer's Folly, 45, 50
Altogether, 56
Anatomist, The, 136
And Even Now, 206
Anderby Wold, 77
Anthony and Anna, 112
Antic Hay, 61
Antichrist, or The Reunion of Christendom: An Ode, 166
Aphrodite in Aulis, 65
Apple Cart, The, 91, 100
Arabia Deserta, 158, 233
Argentine Ornithology, 226
Armies Before Lewes, The, 232
Arms and the Man, 94
Arrow of Gold, The, 50
Art of Reading, On the, 220
Art of Writing, On the, 220
Ascent of F.G., The, 201
Aubade, 193
Author's Craft, The, 29, 30, 35
Autobiography of a Super-Tramp, The, 182-4
Autumn, 183
Autumn Crocus, 137
Autumn Journal, 201
Back to Methuselah, 91, 95, 97-8
Ballad of St. Barbara, The, 165

Ballad of the 'Clampherdown', The, 144
Ballad of the White Horse, The, 165
Ballads and Poems (Masefield), 164
Barrack Room Ballads, 145
Battle of Footerloo, The, 212
Being Good with Children, 209
Bells of Heaven, The, 174
Berkeley Square, 135
Best of Lamb, The, 210
Bill of Divorcement, A, 129-30
Biography (poem by Masefield), 163
Bit o' Love, A, 105
Bitter Sweet, 133
Black Godmother, The, 39-40
Blue Lion, The, 212
Bonadventure, The, 187
Boots, 144
Boy David, The, 125
Brand, 92
Brave New World, 61
Brazilian Adventure, 233
Breadwinner, The, 131-2, 134
Bredon Hill, 149
Brook Kerith, The, 65
Brown on Resolution, 69
Bucolic Comedies, 193
Bull, The, 174
Buried Alive, 32-3, 129
Byron: The Last Journey, 238
Byzantium, 148
Caesar and Cleopatra, 91
Caesar's Wife, 131
Cakes and Ale, 56
Call It a Day, 137
Candida, 94
Captain Bottell, 68
Captain Brassbound's Conversion, 227
Caravan, 39

- Card, The*, 32
 Cardinal Manning (essay by Lytton Strachey), 237
Cargoes, 164
Carnival, 52
Cathleen ni Houlihan, 107
Cautionary Verses, 166
Cavalcade, 133
Chance, 48, 51
Chant Royal of Feet, 195
Chaos is Come Again, 68
Character and Comedy, 210
Charles Dickens (by G. K. Chesterton), 213
Charles Dickens (by George Gissing), 214
Charlotte Brontë (essay by G. K. Chesterton), 214
Christian Year, The (poem by Charles Williams), 196
Christina Alberta's Father, 27, 95
Christmas Garland, A, 203ff., 213
Christmas Holiday, A, 57
Circle, The, 131
Citadel, The, 66, 67
City of Gold, The, 54
Classic Novelist, The, 215
Claudius the God, 55
Clayhanger, 30, 32, 34, 35
Clayhanger Family, The, 32, 33
Cloud Cuckoo Land, 55
Cold Comfort Farm, 73
Colour of Life, The, 216
Combined Maze, The, 70
Coming of Christ, The, 137
Conquered, The, 55
Contemporary British Literature, 162
Contemporary Novel, The, 21, 22, 24, 26
Cool of the Evening, In the, 176
Cornelius, 134-5
Corn King and the Spring Queen, The, 55
Counter Attack, 171
Countess Cathleen, The, 107, 108-9, 112
Country House, The, 37
Courage, 122
Coventry Patmore (essay by Alice Meynell), 215
Craft of Fiction, The, 219
Cranmer of Canterbury, Thomas, 137, 196
Crescent Moon, The, 54
Crome Yellow, 61
Cromwell, 120
Crystal Vase, The, 218
Curiosities of Politics, 238
Daffodil Fields, The, 164
Dandy Dick, 85
Dangerous Ages, 74
Dangerous Corner, 134
Daily Bread, 177
Danton, 229, 232, 233
Dauber, 162
Dawn in Britain, The, 158
Day In and Day Out, 208-9
Dead, The, 169
Dead Ned, 67
Dear Brutus, 125
Dear Departed, The, 118
Dear Octopus, 137
Death of a Hero, 12, 65
Death of the Heart, 80
Deirdre, 107
Deirdre of the Sorrows, 111
De Profundis, 7, 241
Design for Living, 133
Development of English Biography, 239
Devil to Pay, The, 137
Discovery, 178
Disenchantment, 12
Divine Fire, The, 70
Divorce, 195
Doctor's Dilemma, The, 99
Dog Beneath the Skin, The, 201
Doll's House, A, 91, 132
Donkey, The, 166
Dr. Arnold (essay by Lytton Strachey), 237
Dramatic Opinions and Essays, 89
Dubliners, 63
Dynasts, The, 153-4, 158ff.
Earlham, 218-19
Eggs: an Easter Homily, 212
Egoist, The, 159
Elegy in a Country Churchyard (G. K. Chesterton), 165-6
Elizabethan Essays, 220

Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw: A

- Correspondence*, 242
Emmanuel Burden, 228
Eminent Victorians, 234 ff.
End of General Gordon, *The*, 238
Eden End, 134
English Journey, 13
Englishman Looks at the World, *An*, 21
English Poems, 187
English Poetry, *On*, 191
English Wood, *An*, 190
Erewhon, 7
Eros and Psyche, 140
Essay on Comedy, 124
Essays of Alice Meynell, 216
Esther Waters, 64
Esto Perpetua, 231
Eve, 176
Everlasting Mercy, *The*, 163
Experiment in Autobiography, 242
Experiment with Tune, *An*, 135
Explorer, *The*, 131
Eyeless in Gaza, 61
Eye-Witness, *The*, 231-2

Faber Book of Modern Verse, *The*, 199
Faber Book of Short Stories, *The*, 69
Fallen Angels, 133
Falling of the Leaves, *The*, 146
Family Reunion, *The*, 137-8
Far Away and Long Ago, 222, 224
Farewell to Poesy, 184
Fate of Homo Sapiens, *The*, 23
Father and Son, 239-40
Father Brown Stories, *The*, 79, 81
Feast, *The*, 204
Fiery Particles, 12
Fifteen Acres, *The*, 176
Finnegan's Wake, 62, 63
First Mrs. Fraser, *The*, 112
Flaming Terrapin, *The*, 166
Flashing Stream, *The*, 137
Florence Nightingale (essay by Lytton Strachey), 235
Flush, 76
Flying Draper, *The*, 66
Flying Inn, *The*, 166
Forest Lovers, *The*, 217
For Lancelot Andrewes, 220

- For Services Rendered*, 132
Forsyle Saga, *The*, 26, 37, 40, 42, 53
Fortress, *The*, 53
Fountain, *The*, 68
Francis of Assisi, 213
Freelands, *The*, 38-9
From the Mouth of the Sahara, 228
Fumed Oak, 134
Furnace, *The*, 177

Gaudy Night, 79
Geneva, 100
Gentlest Art, *The*, 209
Georgiad, *The*, 166
Georgian Literary Scene, *The*, 53
Georgian Poetry, 173 ff.
Geraniums, 177
Getting Respected in Inns and Hotels, 230
Giardino Pubbico, 193
Gipsy Girl, *The*, 176
God-Forgotten, *The*, 230
God the Invisible King, 2
God's Funeral, 156
Golden Road to Samarkand, 179
Good Companions, *The*, 66, 134
Good Friday, 127
Good King Charles's Golden Days, *In*, 100
Grand Babylon Hotel, *The*, 32
Granite, 130
Grasshoppers Come, *The*, 65
Great Adventure, *The*, 33, 129
Great Lover, *The*, 168
Green Mansions, 225
Greenwood Hat, *The*, 242
Guy and Pauline, 53

Hail and Farewell, 64, 242
Halfway House, 217
Hap, 152
Harvest Home, 209
Hassan, 178-9
Hatter's Castle, 67
Hay Fever, 133
Heartbreak House, 97, 126
Heart of Darkness, 50
Heart's Journey, *The*, 181
Heather Field, *The*, 107

- Heloïse and Abelard*, 65
Her Privates We, 65
Herries Chronicle, The, 53-4
Hide and Seek, 180
Hilda Lessways, 32
Hindle Wakes, 119
His People, 227
History of England (by Hilaire Belloc), 229
History of England, A Short (by G. K. Chesterton), 229
History of Mr. Polly, The, 19, 21, 24, 25, 27
Hollow Men, The, 200
Holy Deadlock, 66
Hope for Poetry, A, 17
Horseman, The, 181
House in Demetrius Road, The, 53
How at Once, 185

I Am Jonathan Scrivener, 68
I Claudius, 55
Idea of Great Poetry, The, 219
I Have Been Here Before, 136
Imperial Palace, 35-6
Importance of Being Earnest, The, 86
Impressions and Comments, 213
In a Green Shade, 218
Indian Summer of a Forsyte, The, 37
In Good King Charles's Golden Days, 100
Inn of Tranquillity, The, 37, 38, 39-40, 100, 121
In Procession, 190
In Tenebris, 155
In the Cool of the Evening, 176
In the Country, 184
In the Poppy Field, 176
In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations', 156, 157
Into Battle, 169-70
Invitation to the United States, On an, 155

Joan and Peter, 25
Joanna Godden, 72
John Bull's Other Island, 99, 106
John Ferguson, 112
Johnson Over Jordan, 136

Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters, 44, 50
Journal of a Disappointed Man, The, 241
Journals of Arnold Bennett, 32
Journey's End, 13
Juan in America, 68
Juan in China, 68
Jude the Obscure, 150, 156
Judith Paris, 53
Juno and the Paycock, 113
Justice, 36, 102-3

King of Nowhere, The, 136
Kipps, 19, 25

Laburnum Grove, 134
Lady Chatterley's Lover, 15, 58, 60
Lady Chatterley's Lover, Apropos of, 58
Lady Frederick, 131
Lady into Fox, 65
Lagoon, The, 45
Lake, The, 64
Lake Isle of Innisfree, The, 147-8
Lamp and the Lute, The, 58
Land, The (Kipling), 144
Land, The (Sackville-West), 188
Land of Heart's Desire, The, 108
Last Poems and Last Plays (by W. B. Yeats), 148
Last Suttce, The, 144
Late Lyrics and Earlier (by Hardy), 155
Later Poems (by W. B. Yeats), 146
Leisure, 185
Lepanto, 165
Letters from America (by Rupert Brooke), 167
Letters of D. H. Lawrence, The, 58, 242
Letters of T. E. Lawrence, The, 66, 241-2
Letters to a Friend, 77
Life and Death of Harriett Frean, The, 71
Life and Death of Richard Tea-and-Nay, 217
Life of Charles Lamb, 210
Likeness, The, 184
Little England, 73

Little Minister, The, 123
Little World, The, 78
Living Alone, 78
Liza of Lambeth, 56
Lodging-House Fire, The, 184
Lonely God, The, 176-7
Lord Jim, 51-2
Lost Leader, The, 112
Love and Mr. Lewisham, 20
Love on the Dole, 13, 66
Loveliest of Trees, 149
Loyalties, 105
Lyrics and Reveries (by Hardy), 156, 157

Madras House, The, 118
Magistrate, The, 85
Magnetic North, The, 70
Magnolia Street, 66
Major Barbara, 6, 95
Man and Superman, 91, 94, 96, 97, 98
Man in the Zoo, A, 65
Man of Honour, A, 131
Man of Property, The, 40
Man Who Died, The, 60
Marching on Tanga, 54
Margaret Ogilvie, 122
Mariners, 130
Marrying of Ann Leete, The, 117
Mary Olivier: A Life, 70-1
Mary Rose, 125
Mary Stuart, 120
Meanwhile, 5, 25
Melbourne, The Young, 239
Melloney Holtspur, 128
Memoirs of a Midget, 67
Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man, 241
Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, 241
Memory of Parnell, A, 227
Menelaus and Helen, 168
Middle Parts of Fortune, The, 65
Milestones, 128-9
Mine-Sweepers, 144
Mirror of the Sea, The, 48, 49, 50
Misalliance, 95
Miscellany of Tracts and Pamphlets, A, 19
Miss T., 180
Mixed Marriage, 112
Mixed Vintages, 211

Mogreb-el-Acksa, 227, 228
Moments of Vision, 156
Money Spinner, The, 85
Moonstone, The, 80
Mortal Coils, 61
Mother, The, 193
Motley, 180
Mouth of the Sahara, From the, 228
Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown, 75
Mr. Perrin and Mr. Traill, 54
Mr. Petre, 228
Mr. Weston's Good Wine, 66
Mrs. Warren's Profession, 93
Multitude and Solitude, 67
Murder in the Cathedral, 137
Murder Must Advertise, 79
Musical Chairs, 137
My Brother Jonathan, 54
My Life (Havelock Ellis), 242-3
Myth of Shakespeare, A, 196

Naboth's Vineyard, 130
Name and Nature of Poetry, The, 149
Natural Theology, 155
Nature's Questioning, 153
New Immortality, The, 135
New Poems (by W. H. Davies), 184
New Signatures, 199
News of the Devil, 166, 195
Nicholas Nye, 181
Nigger of the 'Narcissus', The, 46, 48, 50
Nine Tailors, The, 79
1914 (sonnets by Rupert Brooke), 168, 169
No. 2, The Pines, 206
Nocturne, 53
North Cape, 233
Nostromo, 50
Notes on Life and Letters (by Conrad), 43, 49
Novelist's Allegory, A, 37-8
Now the Full-throated Daffodils, 200

Odtas, 67
Of Human Bondage, 56
Old Vicarage, Grantchester, The, 168

Old Wives' Tale, The, 30, 31, 32,
33-4, 35, 71
One Day and Another, 210
On Nothing and Kindred Subjects, 230
On the Frontier, 201
On the Rocks, 100
Open Country, 217
Open Road, The, 209
Orchard and Vineyard, 188
Orlando, 76
Orphan Island, 73
Our Betters, 131
'Our Fathers of Old', 144
Our First, and Last, 217, 218
Our Theatres in the 'Nineties, 89
Outcast of the Islands, An, 45, 46, 50
Outline of History, The, 27
Out of Harm's Way, 204
Out of the Flame, 194
Over Bemerton's, 211
Oxford Book of English Verse, The,
220
Oxford Book of Modern Verse, The,
148

Palmerston, 238-9
Paolo and Francesca, 87
Parnell, 238, 239
Passage to India, The, 64
Passionate Elopement, The, 52
Pastorals, 186, 187
Path to Rome, The, 229-31
Patrician, The, 37
Peace, 169
Peacock Pie, 179, 180, 181
Pebbles on the Shore, 211
Pearls, 119
Penguin Parade, 69
Penny Whistle, The, 186
Perkins and Mankind, 204
Personal Record, A, 44, 47, 49
Perversion of Rouge, The, 206
Pessimism in Fiction, 216
Peter Abelard, 65
Peter Pan, 125
Phipps, 119
Pillars of Society, 211
Place, The, 171
Place of the Lion, The, 67
Playboy of the Western World, The,
110-11

Pleasant Plays, 93
Pleasures of Ignorance, The, 212
Plough and the Stars, The, 113
Poems (by W. B. Yeats), 146
Poems of Conformity, 195
*Poems of the Past and the Present (by
Hardy)*, 155, 156, 230
Point Counter Point, 61
Poor Caroline, 77, 78
Portrait of Clare, 54
*Portrait of the Artist as a Young
Man*, 63
Post Mortem, 133
Potterism, 73-4
Practical Criticism, 221
Prelude, The, 140, 151
Price of Love, The, 30, 31
Principles of Literary Criticism, 221
Private Lives, 133
*Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft,
The*, 241
Professor's Love Story, The, 123
Prophets, Priests, and Kings, 211,
234
Prufrock and Other Observations, 197
Purple Land, The, 224

Quality Street, 121, 123
Queen's Quair, The, 217
Queen Victoria, 238
Quintessence of Ibsenism, The, 92
Rabbit in the Air, A, 65
Rain, 57
Raines Law Arrest, A, 162
Rcd, 57
Red Peppers, 134
Regiment of Women, 129
Reminder, The, 154
Requiem, 195
Rescue, The, 44, 50
Rest Harrow, 217
Return of the Native, The, 150, 151
Reveille, 149
Revolution in Writing, 16
Revolutionist's Handbook, The,
96
Reynard the Fox, 164
Riceyman Steps, 31, 32, 34-5
Riders to the Sea, 110
Rite of the Passion, The, 196

Rivals, *The*, 176
 Robber, *The*, 183
 Robert Browning (by G. K. Chesterton), 213
 Robert E. Lee, 120
 Robert's Wife, 112
 Rogue Herries, 53
 Roman Centurion's Song, *The*, 144
 Room with a View, *A*, 64
 Root and the Flower, *The*, 67-8
 Rose Anstey, 66
 Rough Justice, 12
 Round Table, *The*, 112
 Run of the Downs, *The*, 144
 Rupert Brooke: *A Memoir*, 167, 173
 Rustic Elegies, 193

 Sacred Wood, *The*, 220
 Sadness and Joy, 184
 Saint Joan, 91, 93, 99, 100
 Saltwater Ballads, 164
 Satires of Circumstance, 157
 Schoolmistress, *The*, 85
 Scrapbook of Katherine Mansfield, *The*, 78
 Scribe, *The*, 180
 Sea Fever, 164
 Sea Garden, 194
 Second Mrs. Tanqueray, *The*, 85
 Second Person Singular, and other Essays, *The*, 215
 Secret Agent, *The*, 46
 Secret Life, *The*, 118
 Secret Sharer, *The*, 47
 Sense of the Past, *A*, 135
 Serial Universe, *The*, 135
 Service, 137
 Seven Pillars of Wisdom, 233, 241
 Seven Short Plays, 111
 Shadow Line, *The*, 50
 Shadow of the Glen, *The*, 110
 Shakespeare, *A Myth of*, 196
 Shape of Things to Come, *The*, 28
 Shelley's Skylark, 156-7
 Shepherd, *The*, 186
 Shepherd's Life, *A*, 223, 225-6
 Sheppey, 132
 Sherlock Holmes Stories, 80-1
 Sherman, 239
 Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet, *The*, 97

Shining Hour, *The*, 137
 Shorter Poems (by Robert Bridges), 140
 Shropshire Lad, *A*, 149
 Short History of England, *A* (by G. K. Chesterton), 229
 Silver Box, *The*, 103-5, 116
 Silver King, *The*, 86
 Silver Spoon, *The*, 36, 42
 Silver Stair, *The*, 195
 Silver Tassie, *The*, 114
 Sinister Street, 52-3
 Skin Game, *The*, 102
 Sleeping Clergyman, *A*, 136
 Snare, *The*, 176
 Society, 85
 Soldier, *The*, 169
 Some Damnable Errors About Christmas, 213
 Some Platitudes Concerning Drama, 100, 121
 Something Defeasible, 206
 Something of Myself, 242
 Song of Honour, *The*, 174
 Song of the Plow, *The*, 188, 217
 Songs of Childhood, 181
 Songs of Joy, 184, 185
 Sons and Lovers, 51, 57
 Soul's Destroyer, *The*, 183
 South Country, *The*, 166
 South Latitude, 233
 South Riding, 77, 78
 Sparkenbroke, 68
 Stars Look Down, *The*, 66
 Staying with Relations, 74
 Stolen Child, *The*, 146
 Storyteller's Holiday, *A*, 65
 Strange Meeting, 172
 Stricken Deer, *The*, 239
 Strife, 101, 105-6
 Studies in a Dying Culture, 16
 Studies in the Psychology of Sex, 243
 Success, 228
 Suicide in the Trenches, 171
 Summing-Up, *The*, 56
 Sussex Gorse, 72
 Sweet Lavender, 85
 Swinnerton: an Autobiography, 53

 Taliessin in Logres, 195
 Talleyrand, 239

- Tamarisk Town*, 73
Tarpaulin Muster, A, 162
Tess of the D'Urbervilles, 151, 156
Testament of Beauty, 140ff.
Testament of Friendship, 17, 77
These Twain, 32
They Seek a Country, 54
They Were Defeated, 74
This Misery of Boots, 19
Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury, 137, 196
Those Days, 81
Those Thirty Minutes, 211
Three Plays (by Noel Coward), 132
Three Plays for Puritans, 94
Tillie, 180
Time and the Conways, 134, 135
Time, An Experiment with, 135
Time Machine, The, 20
Time's Laughingstocks, 154
Tobias and the Angel, 137
Tobit Transplanted, 78
Told by an Idiot, 3, 74
Tolstoy and the Cult of Simplicity, 214
To Nature, 187
To-night at 8.30, 134
Tono-Bungay, 18, 25-6, 102
Too True to be Good, 100
Tragedy of Nan, The, 127, 128
Trelawney of the 'Wells', 85
Trent's Last Case, 81
Trial of Jesus, The, 127
Trust the People, 119
Twelve Pound Look, The, 124
Twelve Types, 214
Twilight of the Gods, The, 65
'Twixt Land and Sea, 47
Typhoon, 43

Ulysses, 62, 63
Uncelesstial City, The, 166
Under Western Eyes, 47
Undertones of War, 13, 187
Unicorn and the White Doe, 190
Unpleasant Plays, 93
Untilled Field, The, 64
Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, The, 220

Valour and Vision, 171
Vanessa, 53
Variety Lane, 209
Vessel of Wrath, The, 57
Victorian Age in Literature, The, 214
Victory, 48
Vigils, 181
Virginia Woolf, 77
Virtue, 212
Voyage Out, The, 75
Voysey Inheritance, The, 116, 118

Waggoner, The, 187
Walking Song, 195
Wanderings of Oisín, The, 146
War in Heaven, 67
War-Song of the Saracens, 179
Waste, 118
Waste Land, The, 197-8
Water Gipsies, The, 66
Way Through the Woods, The, 144
W. B. Yeats: A Critical Study, 146
Wedding Guest, The, 123
Wessex Poems, 152, 153, 158
What Every Woman Knows, 124
What the Public Wants, 129
Wheels of Chance, The, 19
When a Man's Single, 122
'When I Set Out for Lyonesse', 157
When We Are Married, 136
When You are Old, 146
White-Headed Boy, The, 112
White Maa's Saga, 69
White Man's Burden, The, 145
White Monkey, The, 42
White Peacock, The, 57
Who Killed Cock Robin?, 192
Widow in the Bye Street, The, 164
Widower's Houses, 93
William and Mary, 206
Will Shakespeare, 130
Wiltshire Essays, 217
Wind Among the Reeds, The, 146, 147
Windlestraw, The, 38
Windows of Night, 195
Wine, Water, and Song, 166
Within the Gates, 114
Woman Who Did, The, 14

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <i>Women in Love</i> , 58 | <i>You Never Can Tell</i> , 94 |
| <i>Wonderful Visit, The</i> , 24 | <i>Young Melbourne, The</i> , 239 |
| <i>Woodlanders, The</i> , 151 | <i>Younger Generation, The</i> , 119 |
| <i>Work in Progress</i> , 63 | <i>Youth</i> , 50 |
| <i>Work, Wealth, and Happiness of Mankind, The</i> , 28 | |
| <i>Works of Max Beerbohm, The</i> , 202, 206 | <i>Zeal of Thy House, The</i> , 137 |
| <i>World of William Clissold, The</i> , 5, 21 | <i>Zuleika Dobson</i> , 202 |

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